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48. 1879.

TALES OF THE COMPANIES;

OR, THE

CITIZENS OF OLD LONDON.

J. BILLING, PRINTER, AND STEREOTYPER WOKING, SURREY.

FITZ ALWYN,

THE FIRST LORD MAYOR,

AND

THE QUEEN'S KNIGHTS.

A Tale of the Drapers Company.

BY

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CHAPTER I.

The pure transparent twilight of a summer evening had settled over the city of London, but the close of the day had brought not its accustomed quiet; beneath the casements of the staid citizens, were heard the sounds of the harp and the viol, while gaily attired bands of youths and maidens paraded the streets, singing in celebration of the eve of Saint John, and hanging garlands of flowers over the doors. Many of these musicians were licensed minstrels, but in company with them upon this occasion were

the prime of the youths of the city, and the pretty daughters of many of the inferior class of traders.

The thin gray colours of the twilight had just deepened into the soft obscurity of a summer night, when a large party of the revellers turned from the Cornhill or Corn Market towards Canwyke, or, as it is now called, Cannon Street. The minstrels in this troop were gaily clad in robes of green stuff, with silver chains round their necks, and the maidens had white mantles and kirtles of watchet colour. The foremost of these maidens held in her hand a wreath of violets and cowslips mixed with the magical vervain, woven in all the garlands on Midsummer eve. The veil worn by this girl had fallen from her brow, and as the torches borne by her male companions flashed around her, her golden hair glittered, and her transparently fair skin caught an unwonted glow. The hilarity of those around her seemed fully partaken by the young girl, and as a louder strain rose from the harps and the viols, she passed on with a light dancing step, adding her own clear and sweet voice to the chorus of the song :

"Shrive ye, and sain ye, my maidens bright,
Breathe a prayer to the good St. John to-night ;
Weave ye the garlands which blooming or sear,
Shall tell your own doom for the coming year.

Woe for the slumbering maid, o'er whose head
The rose leaf to night shall fall withered and dead,
Whose dreams of the shroud and the death-bell, but borrow,
From fate's mournful whispers each image of sorrow.
For the maids whom we love may St. John prevent,
In his goodness, such visions of ill portent;
And forbid that a flower should drop away
From his magical wreath ere the break of day."

The last words of this chorus were arrested on the maiden's lip by a rough hand grasping her arm, and an angry voice in her ear.

"A seemly course, Rose Waring, for a modest maiden, to roam through the city on the eve of St. John, with a set of saucy minstrels and idle apprentices!"

"Most wise and discreet master Gilbert, is it really thyself!" replied the girl with a provoking laugh. "Truly I should have deemed thou wert safe in thy dwelling, ordering thy garments to proceed with thy honourable gild of Drapers to St. Paul's to-morrow, or better still perhaps, engaged in thy devotions. Truly it is only for gadabouts, and light-spirited damsels such as myself to be abroad on Midsummer eve. I fear me, Gilbert, thy danger to-night is greater than mine own!"

The person to whom Rose Waring addressed these words, was a youth of some three and twenty years,

attired in a doublet and hose of murrey coloured cloth slightly garnished with white, he was tall and well made, and his countenance, though its features were far from regular, had something in it honest and engaging.

While Rose spoke, she still pursued her way at the head of the procession, he holding her arm: his reply was made in a less angry but more sorrowful tone.

"I grieve for thee, Rose!" he said; "but if all that has passed between us be forgotten, forget not at least the respect due to thy father's daughter, though he no longer lives to be shamed by thine indiscreet bearing. It ill beseemeth the daughter of an esteemed citizen to assume thy present guize!"

Rose cast down her eyes, and answered in a less confident tone.

"Nay, I am sure, Gilbert, you need scarce take such exceptions at so harmless a frolic, and one indeed which I should never have dared but that you so saucily braved me to it. Go to, is the daughter of a free citizen to be bidden hither and thither like a churl? Let go my arm, I pray thee, Gilbert, I warrant it will be bruised to-morrow. In sooth, I vowed to *present this* garland to-night, to the Norman niece of

the warden of thy craft, the worthy Fitz Alwyn, and may woman never more have her will in this world if I suffer myself to be baulked by thy fancies!"

"Rose, Rose," replied the young man, "let me lead thee to thy home, there are the mad princes, Richard, and John, careering through the streets with their roystering knights; I passed them but now in the Chepe; and what is worse they have with them that ill conditioned Sir Aymer de Montalt, and though his cousin, the worthy Sir Stephen, be also in their train, I warrant that the mischief that is in one Sir Aymer, would make useless all the good counsel of ten Sir Stephens."

"Thou couldst not have hit on a better reason to determine my stay!" said the perverse Rose: "you mind me that I have not seen Prince John since he kissed his hand to me at the riding to the last tournament in Smithfield; and as to Sir Aymer, there is an entire contest of opinion as to that knight; if he be poor, there are none to deny that is a fault owing to the freeness of his gifts; and if he be prompt to take offence, who will say he is not speedy to forgive? but as for thy Sir Stephen, if charity makes a man poor, he will never cease to be wealthy, and woe unto those who offend him. Then Sir Aymer is the handsomest, most courteous of knights. Ah, thy warden

Fitz Alwyn and his niece, are likely long to be at a difference as to those knights!"

By this time Rose and her companions had entered Canwyke Street. The moon had now risen and silvered the towers of the various churches in the neighbourhood, while those of the cathedral of St. Paul loomed darkly in the back ground. An infant city was London in the days of Henry the Second, its streets were few and thinly scattered, strips of garden and green hill appearing in the midst, with fountains bubbling in every corner, and air untainted by the pestilential vapours of a huge metropolis.

The house where Fitz Alwyn conducted his trade as a draper, and where he mostly resided, was a large and imposing building, near to the famous London Stone. Contrary to the usual practice of the middling class in those days, whose houses were in general constructed only of timber, the dwelling of Henry Fitz Alwyn was composed of solid blocks of stone. As Rose and her companions now approached it, an uproar louder than that of the minstrels was heard; and a cavalcade of men and horses came thronging down from the Chepe.

Gilbert had released his hold of the maiden's arm, and was walking sullenly at some little distance from

her: but as that noise assailed his ears, he somewhat quickened his steps: muttering to himself,

"Now it would be but a due penance for this wilful damsel, to leave her to such scant courtesy as these knights and nobles are likely to show, half crazed as they now are with wine and wassail, but I will even keep at her hand, despite of her hard words, for it were truly as wise to be angry with a spoiled child as with Rose!"

In pursuance of this friendly intent, Gilbert kept near to the petulant girl, when she approached the dwelling of Fitz Alwyn. But ere she had sung the first verse of her song, a company of horsemen came galloping down Watling Street, and bending their course towards the draper's house, at once surrounded the little group of Rose and her companions. The costly habits of the foremost among these riders betokened their superior rank, and their turbulent and reckless air made it equally evident that they were disposed to avail themselves of all the undue advantages which that rank bestowed.

"By St. George!" said one of the riders, "a voice sweet as that of the mavis in the woodland, save you gentle maid, vouchsafe us a glimpse of your face, 'tis a fair one indeed, if thy voice be its meet herald!"

The horseman who spoke thus, was a youth of athletic mould, with large blue eyes and floating locks of a bright yellow colour, his vest of fine blue cloth, was richly embroidered, and at his shoulders hung a mantle of the same, lined with the skin of the silver bear, the golden clasp of which contained a sapphire of rare value. By his side rode a youth, still more richly attired, and of almost effeminate beauty: despite however, the perfect form of his features, there was in them something sinister, strangely enough mingled with an expression of reckless voluptuousness.

"Surely Richard!" exclaimed the last of these youths, "our patron, the good St. John, favours us on the eve of his festival; if we mistake not, this is the fair damsel who so cunningly evaded our search after the tournament, but whose looks nathless, we then thought were as kind, as her aspect was fair!"

With these words the youth vaulted from his horse, and approaching Rose with a confident air, offered to salute her. Rose Waring, however, was, in spite of the levity of her manner, a maiden right modest at heart, and innocent of all ill intent, save that of teasing a somewhat jealous lover, when she indulged herself in the hazardous freak of parading the city on Midsummer eve, or smiling when she found that her pretty face

excited the attention of Prince John at the tournament. The dissolute manners, however, which were not among the least vices of the most detestable monarch among the Plantagenets, showed themselves while he was yet a youth; and Rose Waring fairly trembled when she found that she was so well remembered by the prince. As for poor Gilbert, he absolutely shivered with rage, as John threw his arm round the young girl; and in truth, the avowed admiration of so handsome a youth, and a prince to boot, was sufficiently exasperating.

"Now, by the mass, our brother," said Richard, laughing, "this is an undue advantage of thine, it was ourselves whose attention was first excited by the voice of the damsel, and to us should the kiss in fairness be awarded."

As he spoke, the Prince Richard also dismounted, and throwing the bridle of his horse to an attendant, took the disengaged hand of Rose, as if he would have withdrawn her from his brother. There was, however, a careless frankness and good humour in his voice and manner, which evinced him free of all thought beyond the mirth of the moment. Not so, however, was it with Prince John, an expression of rage and hatred distorted his features, and tightening his hold of Rose, he rudely bade his brother keep aloof. Rose, on her

part, terrified by the earnestness of his manner, burst into tears, and loudly implored him to release her.

"Let the damsel go, I pray you, gracious Prince!" said Gilbert, advancing, his lips white and quivering with a passion, that made it very difficult for him to observe those submissions of speech and tone, which John's exalted rank exacted from his own low one.

"And who art thou, insolent knave, or the damsel either, that I should release her for aught but mine own good pleasure?" demanded John.

"For the damsel, gracious Prince!" said the irritated Gilbert; "she is the orphan of an honest citizen, and has hitherto borne on her own part an honest name, which methinks, however, will be scarce amended by your royal admiration. As for myself, I am but a poor craftsman of the mystery of drapers, but my repute also is honest, and as the girl is my betrothed, I choose not that it should be tarnished through her!"

"Poor knave!" cried the Prince, with an insolent laugh; "he is jealous! Here Philip," he continued, addressing one of his attendants, "place the damsel on thy horse, and be thou of good cheer, master draper, I warrant me the time will come when I shall be in the mind to send thee back thy bride!"

"This must not be!" cried Prince Richard, advanc-

ing as his brother was about to put his design into execution. "Release the damsel, I command thee!"

"You command!" returned John, furiously, and still attempting to lift the weeping and struggling Rose on the horse. "You command! go thy way, Richard, pursue thine own pleasure, and leave me to mine!"

A murmur at the audacious conduct of John, had been gradually growing among the citizens assembled in Canwyke Street, and as Prince Richard cast a rapid glance over the crowd, he could see their heavy looks even by the wavering light of the torches.

"Rash, self-willed boy!" he said in a low, stern tone, and laying his powerful hand upon his brother's arm: "See you not how these churls scowl at us? release the damsel, she is not worth a broil with them, and we already in ill favour with the king!"

With these words Richard wrenched the damsel from his brother's grasp, and would have given her to the care of Gilbert, but the worthy craftsman was not at the moment in a position to take care of himself.

Among the retinue of the two princes, when they entered Canwyke Street, was a cavalier attired somewhat primly in purple and white; as for his personal appearance, it was of that common place sort which

we pass without notice: his features were neither handsome, nor the reverse, his figure about the middle size, and neither remarkable for awkwardness nor grace. Behind this cavalier, who was no other than that Sir Stephen de Montalt, spoken of by Rose Waring, rode one of those unhappy creatures whose deformities, owing to the bad taste of the age, introduced them to the houses of the great. Since the most abominable ugliness was in these beings the most admired, there were very few dwarfs indeed, more attractive than Fabian, the favourite attendant of Sir Stephen de Montalt: a very imp for spite and mischief, there was not an evil deed perpetrated about the court of Queen Eleanor, in which he did not contrive to have his share; for his cunning was at least equal to his malice. The qualities of Fabian were indeed so annoying that many had been the requests preferred to Sir Stephen by his other attendants, that he would dismiss the dwarf from his service; but the denial of the knight was always couched under the benevolent plea, that if dismissed by him, the poor Fabian must certainly starve, as no other knight or gentleman would bear with so mischievous a creature.

Some persons there were indeed, who openly avowed that they had not a full faith in those excellent quali-

ties of Sir Stephen himself, which had made him at once, and in seeming contradiction to all rule, a favourite with the jealous and vindictive queen Eleanor, the haughty, but sage Henry, and the young and dissolute princes his sons. These persons then, who perversely set up an opinion of Sir Stephen, opposed to that of the king and all his family, had been heard to assert that it was the abominable disposition, no less than the abominable ugliness, of Fabian, that induced his master to retain him in his service, that the malicious tricks which he continually practised, gave as much satisfaction to Sir Stephen as to himself, and that the knight had been heard to join in the diabolical chuckle with which the dwarf always related his achievements, and hence that charity had no part in Sir Stephen's abiding by his imp-like page: for to this office he had latterly promoted the dwarf. How far this last report of Sir Stephen was correct, may be inferred by the circumstance, that, while the two princes were disputing respecting Rose, Fabian at a word from his master, slipped off his horse, and pushing his way through the crowd, twisted his long sinewy arms round Gilbert's legs, and threw him into a most undignified position, at the very moment when Prince Richard turned to tender him the guardianship of the damsel.

Gilbert was a powerful young man, and recoiling as the dwarf tripped him up, he seized the latter by the throat, and they both rolled together on the ground. In point of strength, however, they were nearly matched, and the struggle might not very readily have terminated, but for the interference of the bystanders, among these were many of Gilbert's fellow craftsmen, besides the youths belonging to the gilds of other trades, and all of these were disposed to take part with a citizen assaulted by a nobleman's retainer; for the invidious distinction of Norman, and Saxon, had not yet ceased to create ill blood. The conduct of Prince John too had already roused their anger, and they wanted only an excuse to fall upon some of the prince's retinue, since they dared not give vent to their rage against himself; for once the dwarf had over-reached himself in his love of mischief. A dozen stout hands were put forward to the rescue of Gilbert, in a moment he was raised and on his feet, though bleeding smartly from a wound in the forehead, occasioned by his head coming in contact with a flint stone in his fall. The dwarf meanwhile was being kicked and boxed with such hearty good will, by the stout Londoners, that he was fain to scream out to Sir Stephen to come to his assistance, which indeed was not delayed, the knight spurring his horse among the

citizens in a fashion that threatened them with some grievous damage of life, or limb. Nevertheless it was with the blandest tone imaginable, that having his battered drawf once more at his side, he requested the young man whom Fabian had assaulted to step forward, as he would give him all indemnity for the injury which he had sustained.

"Cry you mercy, fair cousin of mine!" said a youth, who, being like Sir Stephen, one in the retinue of the two princes, had slipped off his horse at the moment that Prince John had addressed himself to Rose, and, mingling with the crowd, had taken a very active part in the rescue of Gilbert from the dwarf. "Cry you mercy, fair cousin!" he continued, "to my mind, the worthy citizen may well dispense with thy courtesy; good lack, I have myself found thine enmity a considerable degree safer than thy friendship!"

The usually passionless countenance of Sir Stephen lighted up as he was thus addressed, with a deadly expression of hatred: the pupil of his dull grey eye seemed suddenly to contract, and dart forth fiery flashes of rage and spite, while the devil himself might certainly have envied the malignity of his sneer, as he replied:

"Have a care, have a care, most discreet and frugal cousin, see you not that we stand even beneath

the casements of worthy Master Fitz-Alwyn. I ask not if you fear, that the gentle Mabel should open her lattice and descry your present array, her love no doubt would pass your pardon. But I ween that the worthy draper, her uncle, is a man of thrift, as well as substance, and is ill likely to choose as husband for his niece, the reckless loon, who, in an idle brawl gets his last doublet torn off his back!"

The appearance of Sir Aymer, might have indeed provoked remark from a person far less disposed to severity than his cousin. His dress was composed of a doublet of fine scarlet cloth, turned with white silk, and profusely enriched with gold embroidery. In the scuffle however to rescue Gilbert, this gay habit had been literally torn in rags, and the fluttering strips of white and scarlet, made his appearance sufficiently ludicrous. At this moment, the noise in the street having somewhat subsided, an upper casement in the house of the draper, was gently opened, and Mabel Verneuil, the niece of Henry Fitz Alwyn, appeared at it. Meanwhile Prince John having been foiled in his attempt to detain Rose, had, on his brother wresting her from him, remounted his horse, vowing vengeance at some future time; while Richard, kindly endeavoured to pacify her fears which were increased by the encounter between Gil-

bert and the dwarf. But the whole scene had passed in a very few minutes, and as Mabel Verneuil appeared in the bright moonlight at her chamber window, Richard stepping forward, exclaimed :

"Save you, gentle mistress Mabel, will it please you to request your uncle to give present shelter to a young maid whom an ill-advised courtesy has alarmed!" The moon having now risen and being at its full, rendered useless the flambeaux which were borne by the attendants of the princes, and the citizens. In that soft clear light the beauty of Mabel Verneuil seemed mellowed, the white neck took yet a whiter tint, and more strongly contrasted with the tresses of the deepest chestnut colour, which, scarcely restrained by a bandelet of pearls, floated far below the maiden's shoulders : while the pure and perfect outline of her face was distinctly seen as she bent enquiringly from the window. She was attired in a kirtle of saffron colour, trimmed with light blue and silver, and the veil which partly shadowed her luxuriant hair, was of white sendal, striped with silver thread. At the elevation at which she stood, and beheld only in the thin softening rays of the moon, so fragile was her form, that Mabel Verneuil might have passed for sixteen years of age, she had however numbered two years more.

The moment the damsel appeared at the window, Sir Aymer de Montalt, totally disregarding his dilapidated apparel, stood with his arms folded, gazing up at her as if unconscious of the crowd around him, the presence of the princes, or indeed aught else beyond that of the young beauty. His mantle had been torn from his shoulders, and with it the hood that usually formed the covering for his head; but other casements than that of Mabel Verneuil had now been opened, and the dames and damsels who looked from them thought not of the loss of the knight's hood in admiring the crisp curls of his brown hair, the noble outline of his features, and his graceful form. London was in those days like a village, in comparison to its present extent, and the persons of the young princes were well known to the principal citizens.

"My uncle is from home, my lord Richard!" said Mabel Verneuil, addressing the prince, and turning her head as if unconscious of the ardent gaze of Sir Aymer, "but I am sure I should have his warranty for admitting this damsel be she only in distress, apart from the expressed wish of your grace!" then as Richard led the maiden forwards, Mabel caught a glimpse of her face, and uttering the name of Rose, in a tone of grief and surprise, she hastily quitted the casement. Meanwhile Prince John, with Sir Stephen

and his more immediate attendants, finding that no profit and but little honour was to be gained in prolonging their dispute with the citizens, had remounted their horses and ridden away; and even while they were departing, a hand laid somewhat earnestly on Sir Aymer's arm, aroused him from his reverie; and hastily turning, he beheld his own only attendant, Eustace, a youth of some seventeen years of age.

"My good master!" said the boy, looking up affectionately in the young knight's face, "did I not hear you say that to-night you were to see Jacob of Milan? the evening is wearing on, Sir; besides Fitz Alwyn may return, and that evil-conditioned Sir Stephen did but speak the truth for once, it would ill behove your cause, dear master, that the draper saw you in this guise. I have here the sad coloured mantle which you bade me hold ready for you when you left the princes, which, by our lady! I wish you had done an hour since, so would your best vest and mantle have been safe. Ah, Sir Aymer, it will grieve me now more than ever to behold the rich suits of your cousin!"

"That is an evil, Eustace, for which there is ready comfort," replied Sir Aymer, moving down Canwyke Street, with the boy by his side; "had I a various

wardrobe, it would be a puzzle what suit to choose, for thee and for myself!"

"The only comfort I have," replied Eustace, with the tone and manner of an angry girl, "is, that for all his rich garments, Sir Stephen can no more compare his looks with those of my dear Sir Aymer, than the jack-daw can compare his plumage with the peacock's!"

Laughing heartily at this sally of his devoted attendant, Sir Aymer, having reached a spot where the shadow of an unusually lofty house threw a shade over the street, took the mantle from the boy, and wrapping himself in it, drew the hood closely over his face, but in such a manner that he could see well between the folds. Then bidding Eustace remain in the shade, he stepped a little way back towards the draper's house, and perceived the door close upon Rose, and the departure of Richard, and his attendants.

"Eustace!" said the knight, when he returned to the spot where he had left the boy; "do you hasten at once to the wine house in Canwyke Street, where you always wait with the horses when I visit Jacob; if I mistake not I have seen there the youth who had the encounter with Fabian. Thou knowest Eustace, in what manner my gentle cousin will indemnify the poor craftsman, for the merited drubbing of that hound of

a dwarf. Do you therefore tell him from me to beware how he lets either Fabian or his master gain a knowledge of his person, I think not in the confusion they could have any chance to remember him, unless he of his free will presents himself to them again!"

Having given these instructions to the boy, Sir Aymer, wrapping himself in his mantle, set off at a rapid pace in the direction of St. Paul's.

CHAPTER II.

The interminable labyrinth of houses which surrounds the modern building, was unknown in the vicinage of the ancient gothic cathedral of St. Paul. Paternoster Row was in its infancy, and a mart for the sale of rosaries, holy water pots, crucifixes, and such other articles used by the Catholics. About Blackfriars the houses were thinly scattered, the principal building being the monastery itself; again on Ludgate Hill were the dwellings of some of the citizens, and between Temple Bar, and the village of Charing, there were only a few houses dotted at intervals on the banks of the river. Sir Aymer de Montalt, desirous to avoid observation, bent his way along Watling Street, and hastily crossing the end of the Chepe, which was full of parties of the Midsummer-eve revellers, he bent his steps in the direction of the present St. Martin's-le-*Grand.*

The towers of the old Cathedral of St. Paul stood out darkly defined against the clear sky of that bright summer night, as Sir Aymer hurried past them, and the heavy tongue of the clock told the hour of ten: answered by the hundred voices of the city churches, gradually dying away in the distance of Aldgate, and White Chapel. Sir Aymer quickened his steps: "'Tis past the hour!" he muttered, "and the Milanese loves not to be kept waiting; by all the saints! 'tis a hard fate for a Christian knight of noble blood, to hold his time at the pleasure of a miserable Israelite. Though to do the Jew justice, he has given me nearly all that I myself supposed the value of the jewels: and alack, it seems to me that this pitiful gold is the real yellow king, who holds prince and peasant alike in his bondage, for a bond slave, in truth, is the poor man, be he gentle or simple!"

With this sage remark, by which it would appear that the scourge of poverty could be woefully felt even in the far off days of Henry the Second, the young knight passed on with a quickened step, and reached the church which then stood in St. Martin's-le-Grand, and gave its name to the place, just as the last note of the time had been tolled from its clock-tower. Among the fields that stretched round the church, were scattered a few humble tenements, and amidst them, but

surrounded by its own garden, was a long, low, roofed building, towards which Sir Aymer bent his steps.

A wicket entrance to the garden was on the latch, but on the knight pushing it back, a large dog sprung forwards, uttering a low growl; at a word from Sir Aymer, however, the creature seemed pacified, and recognizing him, walked quietly by his side, till he reached the door, and then crouched down at his feet. This house, which was of stone, appeared to have but one story, it was of a strange, irregular form, seeming as though the occupants had, at various times, added fresh rooms to the original building, as suited their fancy, or convenience. It would have appeared, too, that this house was of some antiquity, for in some places, where the moon shone on the walls, they were discovered crumbling with the lapse of years, while, for the most part, they were thickly clad with moss and ivy. The garden, meanwhile, had been suffered to fall into neglect, the trees were unpruned, the grass long upon the paths, and noxious weeds springing up among fair flowers.

It was not long before, in reply to his knock, Sir Aymer heard a footstep within; a small wicket in the door was drawn back, and the face of an old man appeared, bearing in his hand a lamp, which as he held it up, gleamed full upon a set of dark wizened features,

animated by a small restless black eye. The dress of this man, was the Jewish gaberdine, and a small black velvet skull-cap, which was perched upon the top of his head, gave an almost ludicrous oddity to his appearance.

"Eh, sir knight!" he said, speaking in a thin querulous voice, and with a strong Italian accent, "so you have come at last, the poor Jew has been waiting till he is weary, 'tis an hour beyond our appointed time; but what then, in this day it behoves the children of Israel to be humble, for the hand of the Lord is heavy upon them!"

While speaking thus, the Jew undid the innumerable heavy fastenings of the door, drawing back immense bolts, and removing ponderous iron bars, with an ease and celerity, little to be expected from his apparent feebleness. The last bolt being withdrawn, he held back the heavy oaken door, which it now appeared was lined with iron, and motioned for the knight to enter. Sir Aymer, therefore, stepped at once into a long, low roofed passage, upon the floor of which however, his foot fell softly, the stones being spread with a kind of matting, or felt, a household comfort of which Jacob of Milan had learned to avail himself in the East, where he had spent a great portion of his youth. Though a Hebrew domestic appeared within,

the knight was compelled to wait while Jacob himself again secured the fastenings of the door, for, to no other hands than his own would he trust that important office. Having satisfied himself that the entrance to his abode was really made fast, Jacob in a less peevish tone, invited the knight to accompany him to his private apartment. "My brother, Abraham, sir knight," he said, "is there, and at great pains I have persuaded him to lend you the monies of which you are in want, but it is a large sum, truly it is a great sum. Verily, it must be stones of price on which he may afford to lend so much!"

"There is no doubt, Jacob, of the value of the jewels!" said the knight, with a sigh; "and for no suffering of mine own, would I part with them now, for they have to me a price beyond their worth in gold, but I pledge it to relieve the distresses of another, one whom I have sworn on my knightly honour to assist!"

By this time, the Jew had led Sir Aymer into a kind of workshop, where, with one or two assistants of his own race, he was in the habit of manufacturing the most delicate articles of goldsmith's work, which he sold at a high price to the jewellers of London, the beauty of his workmanship far surpassing anything which they could themselves manufacture. Through

this workshop, Jacob conducted the knight to a small anti-chamber, where he prayed him to wait for a moment. "For," said he, "I would fain once more speak to my brother, for we are not rich, sir knight: we are not rich, just enough to live on, no more, yet I do hope he will lend you the gold, for, truly, I have myself found you an honourable knight!"

With these words Jacob withdrew, but, when after the lapse of a few minutes, he returned, and leading Sir Aymer through a narrow vestibule, threw back a curtain, which, in the Oriental fashion, was suspended at the end of it, and ushered him into the apartment where he said his brother was waiting; the luckless knight, as he glanced round it, and thought of his torn vest, could not but consider that Jacob's complaint of poverty was somewhat superfluous.

The room was fitted in true eastern style; thick carpets, a luxury at that time almost unknown in England, even among the highest classes, were spread upon the floor. A divan was heaped with cushions, covered with rose coloured satin, and the hangings were of the same material; and on a small table curiously wrought of ebony and mother-of-pearl, stood a massive silver lamp, from which rose an almost enervating odour, the oil that fed its flame being strongly perfumed.

This table was drawn close to the divan, on which sat a venerable looking person attired in a gaberdine of blue silken stuff, richly trimmed with fur. On his head he wore an enormous yellow turban, which was placed so low upon the forehead, as almost to overshadow the eyes, while the long white beard which descended to the waist, contrasted strongly with the complexion of the wearer, which was of a dun olive colour. On entering the apartment, Jacob signified to the knight that this person was his brother Abraham, and the eyes of Sir Aymer involuntarily turned with a look of surprise from the one brother to the other, for never in this world were two mortals more unlike. Jacob being a little withered, melancholy, looking person, stooping in the shoulders, with a skin shrunk and parched, and a pair of restless black eyes, ever wandering, as though their owner were perpetually on the watch for the open declaration of the dangers which were in truth in those days, ever impending over the heads of his race. The dark features of his brother, however, despite his snow white beard, were unwrinkled either by care or age, and his eyes, as far as they could be discovered under the shadow of the turban, had a serene and undisturbed expression. His person was portly, and judging from his appearance, as he *sat cross-legged* on the divan, must have been above

the middle height; but he did not rise on the entrance of his brother, and the knight, merely nodding as the latter was named to him, with an air of indifference, if not familiarity, that sent the proud blood of Sir Aymer in a deeper current to his cheek. The scorns of poverty have, alas! been alike keen in all ages, and nations; and the noble but penniless knight, was fain to gulp down the easy assurance of the Jew's manner, and produce the jewels upon which depended his last hope of present pecuniary relief. They consisted of a carcanet, or necklace, of curiously wrought gold, studded at equal distances with emeralds of great size and beauty. The sum demanded in loan by the knight, was a thousand marks. This, after considerable haggling, on the part of the Jews, and an agreement for an exorbitant rate of interest, was brought down to eight hundred.

"But sir knight," said Abraham when the bargain was concluded, "that is a gem of price which you wear upon your finger, I doubt whether I might not advance you another thirty pieces upon it, which to a gallant, in your present straights, will be of some avail!"

"I thank thee, Jew!" returned Sir Aymer, colouring slightly, as he glanced at the ring, a ruby of value. "I thank thee, but I cannot pledge this gem!"

"Nay!" replied Abraham, still persevering, "if you will allow me to examine it, I may perhaps be able to offer you a few pieces more, even as a loan, and if you will sell it, you shall have forty-five pieces!"

"I thank thee, master jeweller!" repeated the young knight; "but this ring was the gift of a dear friend, and I can neither sell nor pledge it!"

"Yet it would be safe in my keeping," reiterated the Jew, "if you choose to pledge it, but I will own, sir knight, that I have taken a fancy to the gem, and I will depart from the line of prudence in order to possess it, and give you a hundred pieces, which I assure you is a sum far exceeding its worth!"

"Oh good, my brother!" interposed Jacob; "what crazy fancy is this, the gem is but small, and forty pieces would be a good price for it!"

"Good or bad, Jacob!" said Sir Aymer, somewhat peevishly, "I am not going to sell it, so fear not that your brother should make an ill bargain!"

"Not even if I were to raise the price to another fifty pieces?" demanded Abraham, with a jocose air, which was ill received by the knight, who replied with some severity.

"Be content Jew, that the poverty of a knight, and a Norman, makes him fain to commit gems once

worn by his mother, to your keeping, but betake thyself to some other pastime, than that of mocking his condition by jeering offers for a trifling bauble! it will be safer and more becoming!"

"Nay, sir knight!" exclaimed the Jew, "I swear that in this you do me wrong, I meant no mock at your distress, and am ready at the moment to pay you down a hundred and fifty pieces for the ruby. Surely," he continued, his eye falling perhaps involuntarily upon the torn garments of the knight, revealed by the large mantle partly dropping from his shoulders; "surely, it is not wise to refuse my offer!"

"It were at any rate as wisely refused as made!" grumbled Jacob, who had in vain endeavoured by sundry winks and signs, to restrain the generosity of his brother's proposals; the young knight however had noticed the glance at his doublet, and replying to that rather than to the words of Abraham, he said: "You forget I am rich for the present; with the eight hundred marks I have just received, I may ruffle it bravely in doublets as whole and as costly as those of my thrifty cousin Sir Stephen!"

"Yet it will be, when the eight hundred marks are expended, that I may see you again, sir knight, and you may remember the Jew's offer for your ring!" returned Abraham.

"I think not!" replied Sir Aymer, laughing, "credit me or not, as you will, my prince of usurers, but if my lack of a dinner, equalled my lack of a doublet, the distress would not tempt me to parting with my ring!"

At this moment, the voice of one of Jacob's attendants at the threshold, announced a new visitant, and Sir Aymer, gathering up the gold he had received, departed, still resisting the solicitations of Abraham, to sell or pledge the ruby ring.

"So!" murmured the latter, as the knight left the apartment, in company with Jacob; "so I fear me much, master warden, that thou art a better judge of the mysteries of cloth selling, than the mysteries of love; thou knowest not how to choose a knight, it seems, and the young maiden of eighteen is to put to shame thine experience of fifty years, and with clearer sight, determine at once for the true and honest hearted: still she may not deny it is a thriftless loon, and the secret of his weekly journies is yet to be accounted for; in the meantime 'tis to be seen whether his cousin will bear out his own fair report!"

At this juncture of Abraham's meditations, the drapery depending over a door opposite to that by which Sir Aymer had disappeared, was raised, and Jacob returned accompanied by no less a person, than Sir Stephen de Montalt.

The face of the knight was flushed, either with wine, or with some fancied subject of triumph, and he advanced towards the Jew, with a careless swaggering air, very different to his accustomed demeanour.

"Well, Jew, my worthy excellent Jew!" he said, "doubtless, it has speeded well, that small matter which I trusted to thy discretion, for my knave Fabian watched my spendthrift cousin hither, and the ruby, I conclude, is for me to purchase."

"I am sorry to disappoint thee, Sir Stephen," replied Abraham, with a dry air; "but Sir Aymer refused to part with the ring!"

"Tush man, tell me not that!" answered Sir Stephen, in an angry and insolent tone. "The poverty-stricken wretch, what else had he to part with: you seek to drive a bargain with me Jew, by pretending that the ring is not yet in your possession, but it is needless, I am willing, as I said, to give more than its real value, for it has to me a price beyond its worth!"

"I seek no bargain, Sir Stephen!" returned the Jew, with the same dry, almost repulsive tone that he had used before; "your cousin really refused either to pledge or sell the gem; when you next meet him, you will doubtless see it as usual on his finger; nor, is he yet so poor as you have imagined; witness these

emeralds which he has left with me to-night, as security for a loan of eight hundred marks!"

Sir Stephen coloured with vexation as Abraham produced these gems, then recovering himself, he said with a bitter sneer:

"Well! well! it is but deferred; it is the last feather from the wing of the popinjay, it needs not a brain marvellously acute, to calculate how long a poor eight hundred marks will furnish the purse of Aymer de Montalt!"

"Not long, indeed, sir knight!" answered the Jew; "if there be truth in the tale, that you in your prudence, and wealth, have turned the freed men from those lands which you bought of Sir Aymer, and that he in his poverty, and imprudence, undertakes to support them!"

"It is indeed, but a true tale, master Jew;" returned the knight, "it ill suited me to keep in my hall, an idle pack to sing the praises of my cousin; but you are therefore bound to us both, when my caution and his thriftless charity, send him to you with the last remains of his fortune!"

"And may the poor Jew, most worshipful knight, venture to inquire whether it be also true, that of which a whisper has been heard, that there are among those who take bread from the almost destitute Sir

Aymer, some whom Sir Stephen pays well for their semblance of poverty, and who laugh with him at the credulity of his cousin?"

As Abraham spoke thus, he leaned somewhat forwards, resting his arm upon the table, and from under the shadow of his huge turban, fixed his eyes scrutinizingly upon the knight. The latter, on his part, was irritated by the question, or the manner with which it was put: and replied in a fierce hoarse voice—

"It is false; they lie, who say I have a hand in the penury of Aymer; it is his own wild extravagance: but were the matter, as the world's dotards say, what would that be to *thee*, Jew, what should'st thou have to say about it? I think thou hast profited too well by both, to interfere for either, barring that thy creed and race should make thee slow to canvass the deeds of a christian and a knight!"

"Pardon, pardon! most noble and honourable Sir Stephen!" cried the Jew, "were the tale as I have said, and as it was told to me, what indeed, should I say? but that you are a sagacious, no less than a noble knight! In the mean time it irks me much, that Sir Aymer should be for once of your mind, and hold so obstinately to retaining the ring, which doubtless you have so many wise and good reasons for wishing to possess!"

There was perhaps, something slightly cynical in the tone or looks of the Jew Abraham, as he spoke thus, for his brother Jacob, marking the knit brow of the knight, somewhat hastily interposed to prevent such reply, as he might have made, saying—

"Be at accord with us, I pray thee, good Sir Stephen, Sir Aymer is but giddy brained; I would wager the jewels he has left with us to-night, against a child's luck penny, that before a month is out, we shall see him upon the question of the ring!"

"'Tis like indeed, the thoughtless prodigal will squander his present store, even so soon," answered Sir Stephen; "and hark you Jacob," he continued, as the latter ushered him towards the outer door of his dwelling; "hark you, it seems to me, that for some reason which I wot not of; this brother of thine is marvellously disposed towards my cousin; but I say, let his folly be fed fast, so shall it be the sooner cured, when want, real personal want, presses on the spendthrift, he will learn wisdom at the hand of misery, and wisdom cannot be too dearly bought. So let his rank follies cure themselves, his present store will be soon expended in fresh riots, and then the ring, the ring, good Jacob, five times its value shall be thine, when I receive from thy hands the ruby ring, delivered to thee by Sir Aymer, to supply his profuseness!"

The Jew closed the door upon Sir Stephen, with an assurance that he would leave no scheme untried, that should induce Sir Aymer to part with the ring; but when the knight's back was fairly turned, and Jacob was fastening his ponderous bolts, he muttered in a low tone:

"Oh father Abraham! how the spirit of malice and unrighteousness possesses this man; has he not got the poor Sir Aymer's monies, has he not got his lands? and yet he cries, not enough, not enough!" Sir Stephen meanwhile, as he crossed the garden, had his soliloquy too.

"Eight hundred marks! well eight hundred marks! the heedless, reckless prodigal, 'tis but a little while to wait, and then fair Mabel Verneuil, thou art cheaply bought with thy uncle's treasure chests, at ten times the value of thy love token to yon scatterbrain!"

The philanthropic meditations of the knight were here interrupted, as he approached the wicket, by a low, savage growl, from Jacob's dog, and a dark object came rolling towards him; the rays of the moon, falling unequally among the tall trees on either side of the path, gave this object the appearance of a huge black ball, Sir Stephen started back, and it was only a diabolical chuckle that made him aware that it was his favourite dwarf, who was crouched at

his feet, apparently in high amusement at his master's evident state of alarm.

It was not however upon Sir Stephen, that the dwarf could pass off his tricks with impunity, though his mingled love of malice and mischief often led him to attempt them, though invariably to his own cost; as it proved on the present occasion; for no sooner was he recognised by Sir Stephen, whose temper was by no means sweetened by his disappointment respecting the ring, than the foot of the latter saluted his person with a force that sent him rolling along the path with more speed than pleasure. He rose at once from the attitude which he had assumed, partly to frighten the dog, and partly to startle his master, and crept whimpering to his side.

"Take notice, thou imp of mischief!" cried Sir Stephen, "the next time you dare attempt your unseemly manœuvres with me, I will deliver thee to some of the serving men whom you have offended, and bid them take revenge for me and for themselves, out of thy ill-fashioned person!"

This threat seemed both to terrify and irritate the dwarf, for shrinking behind Sir Stephen, he moaned and gibbered; occasionally indulging in jestures of rage and hatred, unnoticed by the knight, who stalked forwards in moody silence, 'till Fabian having overcome

his spite against his master in the hope of indulging it against somebody else, again stole to his side, and exclaimed with his eternal chuckle—"I found him out master, his name is Gilbert, a member as he told the prince, of the craft of drapers, and the damsel Rose, is marvellously free of the company of fair Mabel Verneuil: this I learned at the wine-shop, in Canwyke Street, but I paid for the news, master, I paid!"

"Truly, thou art an useful knave, there is no denying it!" said Sir Stephen, drawing a purse from his bosom; "but, look you Fabian, here are ten bright pieces, five are for thyself, and with the rest thou must hie thee at break of day, to the great cooking-house, near the Billingsgate; the ship Eleanor will, it is likely, be here with wines from Gascony to-night, and I expect missives from hence, on matters that you wot of!"

"Aye, aye, my master," said the dwarf, in a tone of seeming sympathy, but with a diabolical sneer, distorting his hideous features, "and we cannot say, if Bertram returns without news, that such news is good, these matters must be cared for, my master; they must be cared for, or else, good lack, what becomes in the end of the favour of the royal Eleanor, or the brave princes, or worse than all, of my sage lord the king! Yet keep thy courage, good master, keep thy courage,

the king they say did put out the eyes of a page who offended him, and the queen, they say, did poison Rosamond Clifford, and the princes, it is said, do league against their father; but thou art cunning Sir Stephen, and can keep a tongue well oiled, and so, if thou hast tricked the king and the queen, and the princes, from thy head shall their wrath be averted, and towards thee, shall these fierce ones be harmless as lambs!"

Whether this eloquent address of his page inspired Sir Stephen with any comfort under the apprehension of the royal displeasure, we cannot pause to inquire, it being desirable to accompany Jacob of Milan back to the apartment, in which his brother had given audience to the kinsman knights. A strange metamorphosis had taken place in his absence; on the divan where Abraham had sat, appeared a portly and handsome man, seemingly about forty-eight or fifty years of age, attired after the fashion of a London citizen of substance, and consideration, in a close fitting tunic of purple cloth, and a long loose upper robe of crimson, edged with dark fur, and a massive gold chain about his neck. On a close inspection, it might have been thought that the handsome and open countenance of this person, bore some resemblance to the dignified aspect of Abraham the Jew, but it was lost in the absence of the long de-

scending and snowy beard, and heavy shadowing turban; for the olive tint of Abraham's features too, the complexion of this person was fair and florid, and certainly there was nothing Oriental in his large, clear blue eyes. A prompt elucidation however, of this apparent mystery was in the turban, and gaberdine, and very beard itself, which now lay on the divan beside the stranger, while a young Hebrew stood before him, holding a silver bowl, containing some liquid, whose powers had removed the walnut hue from his hands and face.

The hair of this person, was of the darkest chesnut colour, very lightly sprinkled here and there with grey. There was something frank and hilarious in his manner, something that bespoke a person on very good terms, both with the world, and himself, and one who, honest and just in his dealings, had a full right to this satisfaction.

"Well, my friend Jacob!" said this person, in a full and hearty tone, that evinced how much in the late scene he had disguised his voice as well as his person. "Well, my friend Jacob, did I not play my part to admiration? is there a mummer throughout England whose art may be likened to mine?"

"Indeed, worthy master Fitz Alwyn," testily replied the Jew, in his little shaking tremulous accents,

"I cannot say that I think masking, or mumming, would ever be a vocation of thine; no, nor does it seem to me that you have the wisdom of our king Solomon, upon some other points. Verily, master Fitz Alwyn, you may have some skill in judging of cloth, but very little in trading about jewels, whether to lend on them, or to buy!"

"Why thou most perverse of Israelites!" said Fitz Alwyn laughing, "did you not tell me, before Sir Aymer arrived, that you had seen the jewels yesterday, and that they were fairly worth the sum he would ask for them, but that I must offer much less, and did I not do so?"

"Do so!" repeated Jacob with an air of contempt, "yes, after your own fashion, master Fitz Alwyn, after your own fashions, you offered him seven hundred, I wonder he did not find you out at once, you should on no account have mentioned more than five. Then you were too eager about the ring, and too merry by half, oh the monies are a very serious matter!"

"There is a truth, good Jacob, which you will find no craftsman in London to deny, and certainly not myself!" replied Fitz Alwyn; "but you will admit that if I was too jocose with Sir Aymer, it was a fault by no means chargeable on my speech with Sir Stephen!"

"Oh your speech with Sir Stephen was too rough; you were too much aware of his designs, and a great deal too honest!" returned Jacob.

"Too rough!" cried Fitz Alwyn; "why I thought after the frowns and nods you gave me with Sir Aymer, I had acquitted myself to your full content with his cousin, that I cooled his desire for the ring, and intimated just so much knowledge of his plots as might a little correct them for the future."

"Aye, and it was in that, master warden, that you were most at fault; what was it to thee how the knight had possessed himself of the flesh pot of his cousin's inheritance, that you should speak of it with a harsh voice and a searching eye? it was safer to chance the suspicions of Sir Aymer, by a too hasty proffer of the monies, than to awaken the cunning of Sir Stephen, by carping at deeds, the sin of which could rest only with himself, but the profit of which he might share with others. Verily, that false knight is one with whom it would behove us to be wary as the serpent, if not harmless as the dove!"

"There is a justice in what thou sayst, good Jacob:" answered Fitz Alwyn; "but it must be admitted that my present task is one of difficulty and doubt. Thou knowest I have no child, and that my niece Mabel is dear to me as a daughter; and to win

her favour come these two knights, Sir Aymer passing well to look upon, pleasant of speech, and truth would have me say, it seems most frank and kind of heart. But what then, he thinks always to spend rather than win, to pass through life as though its sole purpose was to feast and dance, to give and to lend; truly a proper husband he will make! where at the end of a year, when placed at this gallant's disposal, will be the hoards of my father Leofstane, and the lands in Normandy, which Mabel inherited from her own sire? No, no, this wild knight may possess himself of the damsel's good will, but it is scarce likely he will prosper in mine. But then have we Sir Stephen, a knight of thrift and station, high in the king's good will, talking of his lands and beeves, yet shall I choose him, false and cruel as I know him to be, for truly I can well surmise for what purpose he would have the ring!"

"There is yet another course for thee, master warden!" said the Jew, "dismiss both these knights, and choose another husband for the fair Mabel!"

"A counsel, my good Jacob, I should be prompt to follow!" cried Fitz Alwyn; "but this fair Mabel has her will upon the subject, and so many and such stout contests have we had thereon, that though I may dismiss Sir Stephen, she is little likely therefore

to frown upon his cousin. And in truth I could myself almost pardon his extravagance as a fault that time would cure, could I hope that he was yet untainted with any deeper vice, but these weekly absences from London, and his refusal to declare their purpose, bode I fear but ill!"

"I think not, master Fitz Alwyn, I think not," answered the Jew; "I have found him in all dealings a just and honourable youth; but follow him, follow him, as you purpose, I think not but that he shall come out like gold tried by the fire!"

"I like thy counsel well, Jacob," responded the draper; "but I fear me that is only because it chimes with mine own previous humour; so do our inclinations play masters over our will!"

With this remark Fitz Alwyn proceeded to make his adieus to the Israelite, and in a few minutes was on the way to his own dwelling.

CHAPTER III.

So early as the time of Henry the Second, the good citizens of London were reputed for their wealth, and already in possession of many of the comforts and luxuries which afterwards procured them so great a renown: and in no dwelling within the walls of the city, was this good condition more apparent than in that of Henry Fitz Alwyn, at the London Stone. The lower apartments were daily strewn with fresh rushes, the windows glazed, and the walls hung with tapestry; in the upper ones, large carpets of the same material, were spread upon the floors; and the chamber peculiarly appropriated to the fair Mabel had some degree of richness in its appointments. The hangings wrought by the active needle of the damsel herself, represented some of the fabulous achievements of King Arthur, and were, as was customary with the superior kinds of tapestry, worked profusely with gaily-coloured

silks: here the British champion received the wondrous sword Escalibar from the hands of the Lady of the Lake, and there the enchanter Merlin was shut by the cruel maiden of his love, within the rock, less stony than her own heart. It is true that amid the wealth betokened by the furniture and adornments of Mabel's chamber, the clumsiness of the ancient Saxon fashions still prevailed.

The heavy oaken bedstead was grotesquely carved at the cornice, with hideous representations of monsters that had not their like in nature, and the same uncouth style of ornament prevailed on the backs of the chairs and legs of the tables. But then the hangings of the bed were of garnet coloured cloth of Damascus, while two ancient candle-sticks holding huge waxen tapers at the bed's foot, were of solid silver, the bowl containing the spiced wine furnished in all the chambers of the wealthy, being of the same metal. The huge space in the enormous fire-place where the wood crackled and glowed on a winter evening, was now filled with earthen vessels containing branches of fennel, hawthorn, and other sweet scented shrubs. Curtains of the same colour and material, as the hangings of the bed, were drawn across the casement. At this time the gentle Mabel was in deep converse with Rose Waring, whom

she had invited to pass the night with her. A shade of thought was on the damsel's brow, and she looked somewhat sorrowfully on the Midsummer wreath of cowslips, and violets which Rose had encountered so much peril to offer her.

"I fear me, gentle Rose," she said, "to try the spell of thy garland, my own heart has too grievous bodings of Sir Aymer, to hope for visions of good omen; for, oh dearest Rose, have you never found that our dreams are most frequently only a reflection of sad waking thoughts?"

"But why lady should your thoughts of Sir Aymer be sad ones?" cried Rose, "is he not a noble and handsome knight, and does he not truly love you, and if he be landless, surely your uncle, our warden of the drapers, has wealth enough for both; and loves you too well not to yield his consent that you should wed Sir Aymer, when he finds that you will have none other!"

"An excellent reason, why my uncle should yield, that I will not!" replied Mabel smiling; "but, my poor Rose, I will tell thee my heart is sad because I fear that my uncle has but too much of reason in his objections to Sir Aymer. Thou dost but read me truly Rose, in thinking that I would trust all mine own worldly goods to Sir Aymer's keeping with a

full faith, reckless though he may have been, that he would have a better care of the heritage on which he would know the comfort of another than himself depended, that is to say if he really loved me: but alas Rose!"—and here the tears of the gentle Mabel fell fast, "if he really loves me—there indeed is the question which I dare not answer. Weekly my uncle has found that the knight absents himself from the court, and ever on these occasions he pursues his way towards that deep and dangerous forest which forms our city's northern bound:—and I fear me Rose that some other love than your friend Mabel is visited in its dark recesses by Sir Aymer de Montalt!"

"That were a matter would soon be settled then if the case were mine," said Rose briskly. "I would plainly tax the knight on the subject of these visits, nor look, nor smile should he have from me, if he did not at once declare their purport."

"In the wish to hear no more from my uncle in favour of Sir Stephen," replied Mabel, "I ventured the course which you now propose: telling Sir Aymer frankly that my uncle drew an ill inference from these secret journies!"

"And what said the knight, dear lady?" inquired Rose.

"At first," answered Mabel, "he sought to treat

the matter with a light air, averring that the pleasures of the chase alone drew him to the forest; but when I pressed the question more closely, his countenance changed, he still protested in the most solemn terms that his visits to Epping prejudiced not his love for me, but owned that he would not relinquish them even at the price of my favour; his knightly honour he said was concerned in the preservation of the secret, and no suffering to himself should induce him to disclose it!"

"Then, my Lady Mabel, were I in your place, the price of my favour this misproud and obstinate knight should certainly pay!" said Rose angrily; "where indeed is the damsel's empire over the heart of her lover, if he is to refuse a request so made; ah, dear Mabel, if you had but a little of my spirit, if you would but brave Sir Aymer, as I this night braved that perverse and conceited Gilbert!"

"Yet I misdoubt me, Rose!" answered Mabel smiling, "if thou wert thyself altogether pleased with the results of that same bravery, when the Prince Richard brought thee hither in tears!"

"Well, it may be," returned Rose, "that I am perhaps a thought too prompt to look into and assert my own cause: yet how, without a spice of my quality, might a maid in your position learn the truth?"

"Indeed I know not that," replied Mabel, sighing.

"Come, tell me Rose, what measure would thy wit suggest!"

"I would ride like a damsel errant, in search of adventures;" said Rose, "I would trust no eyes or ears but mine own, I would learn the day on which Sir Aymer is wont to make these visits to the forest, and with some trusty friend I would track him thither!"

"But where might I find a friend so courageous?" inquired Mabel; "for you know, dear Rose, that the boars and wild cattle which abound in the forest render it a matter of some danger to traverse it: and beyond this difficulty, I am well assured that my uncle would approve of no such junketting; it would be necessary both to assume some disguise, and deceive him, as to the purpose of my journey!"

"As to the friend who will assist you in this straight, Mabel, she is before you," replied Rose; "the other points on which you hesitate are indeed not so easily determined: of how much use now might that froward Gilbert be in our present plight! but the good St. John be my witness, the very boars of the forest are not more perverse or stupid than that youth can be when it suits his humour; but we will baulk that vicious humour yet; we will go where we please without let or hindrance either from lover or guardian, or we are maidens whose lack of wit disgraces our sex.

See you, dear Mabel, my good aunt and uncle are a thought less strict than the warden, and fain to let the gadabout have her will; it will only need therefore that you pray master Fitz Alwyn to let you pass a few days with me at their country abode of Charing, the whereabouts alone will put him off all suspicion, and leave thy true Rose to the invention of some clever masking which should we meet them on the way to Epping, should deceive not only the warden, but the searching eyes of the knight, or the jealous cunning of clever master Gilbert himself. Then as to the dangers of which you talk, no damsel of spirit would regard them for a moment; there are churls on the borders of the forest who will guard us through its recesses, and from whom it may be we may learn something of the track of Sir Aymer!"

Such reply as Mabel might have made to these proposals of her ready witted, but somewhat indiscreet friend, were here interrupted by a knocking at her chamber door, and the voice of a serving woman inquiring whether she had yet retired to rest, as were she up, master Fitz Alwyn, who had returned, would fain speak with her in his sitting apartment.

"Now then, Mabel!" said the impatient Rose, as in compliance with his request the damsel prepared to wait on her uncle. "Now then is the time, in what-

ever humour the warden has come home, to prefer your boon; if his temper be ill turned, it will be wise to leave him for a day or two to himself, and if it be gracious, he will the more readily spare you!"

It was with a heart beating quicker with the contemplation of the first deceit she had ever practised towards the worthy draper, who had so truly supplied to her the place of a parent, that Mabel entered the room, where master Fitz Alwyn was seated at a table, spread for his evening repast, with the substantial fare of the time; goodly capons roasted, and boiled, a huge chine of beef, flagons of ale, and spiced wines. This meal had been deferred to a much later hour than usual, in consequence of Fitz Alwyn's visit to the Jew, for fashion had not then turned night into day; but though the warden of the drapers was not used by any means to despise temporal blessings, his supper stood before him as yet untasted, and a shade of deeper and more anxious thought than usual was visible on his countenance.

"Mabel, my child!" he said kindly, as the damsel approached him, "business of some import will call me from home to-morrow night, and it is possible I may be absent for a day or two: I have therefore sent to you to exact a promise, that during my absence

you will neither see yourself, nor hold through others, any communication with Sir Aymer Montalt!"

"And the proof of the poor knight's utter unworthiness, uncle, which you told me you expected this night would furnish: may I ask whether it is obtained?" inquired Mabel.

"No, my child, it is not!" replied the warden of the drapers; "and when I truly say that I was favourably disappointed, I trust you will not hesitate to give me that promise which I ask, less from a belief, that Sir Aymer is undeserving of you, than from a sense of what precise rules should be observed by the modesty of a young maiden, during the absence of her only protector!"

Now the fair Mabel would at no time have demurred to give the required promise, so profoundly was she convinced, that even in his objections to her lover, the draper was actuated by motives of fatherly kindness; yet it may not be said that she did not yield it the more readily, that it furnished an opportunity for executing the plan of her friend Rose; "for," argued the damsel, "to follow Sir Aymer to Epping, and penetrate the secret of his visits to the forest, is not to hold any communication, direct or indirect, with the knight himself." It was without any blushing, that Mabel prayed her uncle to allow her to spend

the time of his absence, at Charing with her friend Rose, and promised to avoid the knight, a promise indeed, which was given very honestly, as he certainly was the last person whom she would have chosen to detect her in following on his footsteps.

It was then arranged that she should accompany Rose to Charing, on the morrow.

"And I shall trust to you, Mabel," said Fitz Alwyn, "to keep that heedless girl within the bounds of a a due discretion, for such time as you bear her company: for I met the youth Gilbert in my way home, and he was full of just complaints of what he called her unmaidenly conduct: in sooth I told him that I thought her faults were rather those of a giddy brain, than of a false heart: yet it is an ill judgment of Rose to put these jealous fancies in his brain, for he is a worthy and industrious youth, and she may be long ere she find one who will make a truer husband. It is partly indeed on his account that I am willing you should pass the time of my absence with her, since Gilbert accompanies me on my journey!"

This last piece of information which the draper vouchsafed to his niece, occasioned a kind of crazy exultation in Rose, to whom it was communicated by Mabel, when she returned to her chamber.

"Then!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands, "we

are free Mabel, we are free, now thou shalt see what cunning disguise I will devise: and how purely you shall break through the mysteries of this ill-advised Sir Aymer, now that we are free of master Gilbert, whose vexatious and pitiful spirit, I own made me fear for some annoyance!"

CHAPTER IV.

HAVING parted with his master, the dwarf Fabian betook himself as directed, to the great cooking-house on the banks of the river. At this time, the wines brought to London, were landed at Billingsgate, immense cellars being constructed for their reception on the St. Paul's side of the bridge. Near to these cellars was a large establishment, where cooked meats were to be procured at all hours, to the great convenience of strangers visiting London, who usually repaired thither, as wines were to be bought either from the cellars, or direct from the ships. Meantime, a sudden change in the aspect of the night, promised to hurry home the few Midsummer eve revellers, who yet lingered in the streets; the moon had sunk, and heavy clouds rolling over the sky, united with an oppressing closeness of the atmosphere, betokened an approaching thunder storm.

In effect, just as the dwarf neared the end of the Grass Market, a vivid flash of lightning parted the clouds that overhung the tower, illumining the open space that lay between that building and Billingsgate, and playing dangerously among the masts of the vessels which were crowded in the river. The rain then descended with such violence, that it raised a thick steam from the earth, through which the dwarf could barely descry the toppling forms of the houses, that crowded both sides of the bridge. Muttering what was not a benison on Sir Stephen, for employing him on this late errand, he passed on with a quickened step, till he reached the site of the modern Wine Shades; here, lamps were twinkling in the sheds or shops constructed of timber; the bush overhanging the entrance giving notice that there, wines were sold by retail. In the midst of these, were the public kitchens, huge buildings, the outer walls constructed of stone, the bare rafters within, blackened by the smoke of the great wood fires, that were constantly burning, and the air reeking with the fumes of the meat, boiling, baking or roasting. In these kitchens, or cooking-houses, the cooks were employed night and day; and the buildings were held or rented by various proprietors, who by chance, in the first instance, or custom in the last, were patronised by different classes of the

community. Thus the masters, and sailors, of the wine ships, resorted to one peculiar eating-house, and the foreign merchants trading to London, to another, while that portion of idle, or unemployed persons, who are to be found in all cities, and who lead a desultory roving life, repaired to a third. The kitchen at which the wine-traders usually purchased their provisions, was rented at this time, by one Peter, of Gascon origin, but born in London; this foreign descent was no argument in his favour with the true English citizens, but Peter the Gascon, as he was somewhat unfairly named, by dint of an inexhaustible fund of good humour, some sterling kindness of heart, and not a little of the romancing propensity of which his race has been accused, contrived to render himself an universal favourite. It was near midnight when the dwarf reached Peter's cooking house, where he knew that he should learn if the ship Eleanor had arrived. Though he had used all possible speed on being overtaken by the storm, yet his garments were thoroughly drenched, a mishap which by no means sweetened his temper. The violence of the rain had also compelled Peter to close the entrance to his kitchen, and the indignation of Fabian was very absurdly aroused by finding that so merry a party was assembled within, that his knocking was not immediately attended to.

Whereupon using the handle of his poniard as a knocker, he assailed the door with such a volley of blows, kicks, and execrations, as could not fail to be heard even above all the fury of the storm: and it was in consequence opened so quickly that he lost his balance, and fell upon his face across the threshold. Doubly exasperated by the pain of his fall, Fabian rose in a kind of blind frenzy, butting with his head, and striking with his hands, at the first object that came in his way. This happened to be a tall, strong built man in the habit worn by the sailors of the period, and who laughing heartily at the dwarf's anger, seized him by the neck and held him at arm's length, as a boy would do with a refractory kitten. The rage of Fabian did not at first permit him to see by whom he was treated thus unceremoniously, but at last, amid his own sputtering, and kicking, he recognised the stentorian voice of the captain of that very wine-ship, respecting which Sir Stephen had deputed him to enquire.

"Why Fabian, thou malicious little elf, thou eternal imp of mischief," cried the sailor, seating the dwarf in a very rough fashion on an oaken settle, "tell us I pray thee, what work of thy master, the devil, art thou bound upon executing? it might have been thought to be sure, that as one of Satan's true *children, thou* wouldst be busy in the storm!"

"Keep thy gibes for some fitter occasion, Captain Guy!" screamed the dwarf in a loud shrill voice; "I came hither by my master's orders to seek thee, and methinks if thy ship is in port, it would have been but meet observance from a churl like thyself towards an honourable knight such as Sir Stephen de Montalt, if thou hadst at once sought his dwelling, to speak of such affairs as are between ye, and not come here eating and swilling like a Saxon, and leave the honourable knight, to send his honourable page to get wet to the skin, in hunting thee up from thy swinish companions!"

While making this, as he considered, particularly stinging allusion to the Saxons, Fabian pitched his voice in a still sharper key, and looked savagely from side to side, that all the Saxons present might take note of the compliment, and of the speaker's perfect disposition to spit their whole nation upon a bodkin.

Had Fabian however considered the soundness of his bones, rather than the indulgence of his spleen, he would hardly have ventured upon words and looks so potent, seeing that the Saxons were like their own fat beeves, rather dangerous animals when provoked. It might be that, quick and furious as were the glances of the dwarf, he perceived that the persons pre-

sent, were mostly foreign sailors, employed in the French wine trade, but the exceeding popularity of Peter the Gascon, brought all nations and trades to his eating house, and though not noticed at the moment by Fabian, more than one Saxon had resorted there to finish the Midsummer eve festivities with a roasted capon, a flagon of choice Bordeaux, and the marvellous tales and jests of Peter.

This cookshop or eating house consisted of an oblong apartment, paved with stone, at one end of which stretched an enormous fireplace, continually heaped with wood, and before which spits were constantly turning, loaded with huge pieces of beef, and sometimes a whole sheep. On either side of this fire-place were recesses, one of which was occupied by an oven, and the other by cauldrons, from which continually exhaled a savory smell of soups, and boiled meats. The glow of the fire at this season rendered a large screen necessary, within which Peter and his assistants dispatched their culinary operations, but on either side of the kitchen stretched long oaken tables and benches for the guests. Near the entrance was a small side door which led to the sleeping places of Peter and his servants, which were thus situated, as indeed was necessary, at the greatest possible distance from the ovens, and the fire; the whole build-

ing being on the ground floor. Nothing could possibly be neater or cleaner than was this vast apartment. Instead of being strewn, as was the usual custom, with rushes, in which bones and other refuse of the table were sometimes suffered to collect for weeks, the stone floor was well swept and washed every morning under Peter's own superintendence, a kind of dresser near the fire-screen, was well furnished with trenchers, cups and flagons of horn, bone, wood, and brass, all of which were kept scrupulously clean, and the last highly polished. Among the appointments of the kitchen too, must not be omitted the mention of six prodigious casks, or butts, filled, two of them with ale, and the others with different sorts of wine: just underneath the roof also were rows of shutters, which according to the quarter in which the wind set, were opened to let off the smoke; the light being admitted during the day-time, by the same rude expedient. Iron lamps suspended from the rafters by chains of the same metal, lighted the apartments at night, and from those same rafters were hung a tempting array of goodly hams, dried beef, fish, turkies, geese, and other fowls ready prepared for the spit, or the oven.

On this Midsummer eve, as an occasion of public festivity, Peter was even more than usually facetious, skipping hither and thither, and making his jests

heard above all other noises whether within or without. The vivacity of movement, indeed, which Peter habitually exercised, was, on a first acquaintance with him, a matter of some surprise: his proportions were anything but sylph-like, his person being considerably beneath the usual height, with much more than an average breadth: so rotund indeed was Peter, that he more resembled a huge ball than anything else, with another smaller one perched on the top of it, in the shape of a bullet head, the face belonging to which was as red as a full blown peony. As to his costume, though always scrupulously clean, Peter, when engaged in his avocations as a cook, was very primitively attired, in a vest of linen dyed of a dark blue, a kind of night-cap of the same material, together with the common sandal in use among the Saxons—a costume, which for a cook in Midsummer weather, was at least very convenient, if it could not be called very becoming. When proceeding to mass, however, on Sundays and holidays, or on any other occasion that called him abroad, Peter was remarkable for his vest and hose of the best cloth and gayest colours, with the pretension even of a knife, or poniard, dangling by a silver chain.

At the time of Fabian's noisy summons, Peter was engaged within the fire-screen, in dishing up a dainty

treat of stewed ducks, for the particular enjoyment of himself and two or three youths of the city, who were his especial favourites, and whom he had invited to sup with him free of cost. Just peeping from behind the screen, he at once recognised the obstreperous customer, and muttered, while he went on serving up his ducks, "Ah, the dwarf page of Sir Stephen de Montalt, as misshapen in his temper as his body, I like not your fellows from whom the best Bordeaux cannot force a smile, and of such a sort is this goblin retainer!"

The furious screaming voice of Fabian, however, drew a closer attention from two youths who had been chatting with Peter within the screen, and who were of the number of his invited guests, one of whom had a bandage tied round his head as if in consequence of some wound; the other bore upon the sleeve of his light blue jerkin a white dove, the cognizance of Sir Aymer de Montalt, and the two were indeed the draper, Gilbert, and the page, Eustace; the latter having sought out the craftsman by his master's directions, had been invited to accompany him to the supper given by Peter the Gascon.

"As I live," exclaimed Eustace, looking also from behind the screen, and addressing Gilbert, "your friend the merry cook is right, yonder indeed is the

dwarf page of Sir Stephen, now I pray thee, master draper, have a care, for I know not what vile trick this imp may have it in his mind to play thee, but thine will be a new case, if having offended Fabian, you escape his malice, or that of his master!"

This counsel was listened to very quietly by the young draper, either because he was more occupied in harkening to the vituperations of Fabian, or because, like many others, he had no objection to hear a friend's advice, while he preserved the liberty of following his own. Thus it was that the dwarf had no sooner made his flattering allusion to the Saxons and their swine, than Gilbert, darting from behind the screen which had hitherto concealed him, gave Fabian so hearty a box on the ear as extended him a second time on the stone floor.

"Thou ape! thou goblin! thou slander upon all fair proportions!" exclaimed the irritated draper, while the dwarf scrambled to regain his footing, "is it for thee to take exceptions at any use or custom of the English, gentle or simple, and liken them forsooth to swine?"

"Hold your hand, good master, then, hold your hand!" cried the sailor Guy, as Gilbert prepared to defend himself against the dwarf, who, choked with rage, had aimed a blow at him, "hold your hand, 'tis

but a miserable dwarf, 'tis beneath a man even to beat him!"

"True, my master!" answered Gilbert, "but let the mannikin keep a still tongue, nor make his weakness and ugliness a buckler for his malice!"

"The youth speaks with reason, Fabian!" cried the sailor, "sit thee down then, use not hard words, and I warrant me thou shalt escape hard blows!"

This pacific counsel, however, ill suited the stomach of Fabian, who, having now recognized Gilbert as the youth with whom he had had the fray in Canwyke Street, furtively drew a poniard from his girdle, and rushing upon Gilbert, would certainly have inflicted on him some grievous injury, had not Peter, who at that moment issued from behind the screen with his stewed ducks, perceived his intention, and foiled it at the cost of the dainty which he had taken so much trouble to prepare, dashing in Fabian's face the whole of the savoury mess, which, having just been taken boiling from the fire, caused him at once to drop the poniard, and stamp and scream with pain. Peter meanwhile holding the empty dish before him as a shield, in tones scarcely less shrill than Fabian's own, implored the bystanders to thrust him out of the kitchen. "Knives are never used here, my masters!" he said, "save to cut the throats of sheep; if any guest here

takes a poniard in hand, he shall employ it only to carve a goose! Turn him from my kitchen then, this murderous elf, I will have no blood spilt here, save that of swine, which makes good puddings!"

"Be content, Peter, be content!" said the sailor, who, assisted by Eustace, and one or two of Peter's servants, was endeavouring to alleviate the anguish of the dwarf, by wiping the thick and scalding liquid from his neck and face; "be you content, I think that dwarf Fabian is in no condition to give thee more offence to-night; for charity, man, give us a bucket of cold water."

The miserable Fabian, who was scalded very severely, lay on one of the oaken benches groaning in the most hideous manner, but his condition excited but a very small portion of pity in the breast of the usually kind-hearted Peter, who, sulkily bidding one of his servants procure the water, betook himself to the task of picking up the ducks, which were strewn in broken fragments on the floor.

"Have I not more cause to grumble than that vile dwarf, who would have committed murder in mine honest dwelling?" he said; "has he not spoiled the good meeting, and spoiled my ducks, which were excellent of their kind, and his face, if it is scarred in every feature, cannot become more detestable than it

was before! I will petition the king's grace that this elfish creature be not permitted to come to my kitchen, the devil in the midst of the storm has surely driven him hither to-night!"

This sympathetic language was fully heard and appreciated by Fabian, who thereupon turning his head in the direction of the speaker, whom he could scarce see by reason of the swellings on his face, shook his fist at him in impotent rage, groaning out, "Wait, master cook, wait but a little while, if either you, or that base craftsman, escape answering for this, make mince meat of me with mine own dagger!"

"Be patient, Fabian," said the page Eustace, approaching him; "this is but the first time the consequences of thine evil temper have fallen on thine own head, think then how often thy tricks have caused equal pain to others!"

"If thou darest taunt me, thou buckram varlet, I'll strangle thee with thine own girdle!" screamed Fabian. "I will tell Sir Stephen, too, and he shall take the measure for my vengeance, out of thy beggarly master!"

"If the penalty for thy saucy tongue had not been already paid thee for one night!" replied the page, "I would make thee choose other terms for Sir Aymer de Montalt!"

"And thou too!" cried the dwarf, turning his rage again upon the sailor, "thou too Captain Guy, if thou hadst waited, as was thy duty, upon the noble knight my master; this ill hap had not befallen me; but there will be time, I will have my dues out of thy bones too, yet!"

This man Guy was, as before observed, of a tall and powerful frame, his countenance was in unison with his person, the features being large and harsh, and deeply tanned by exposure to the weather; but it was not this alone, that would have excited the intelligent observer's notice, the traits of a violent and perhaps cruel nature, were impressed in the iron muscles of the mouth and jaw, and flashed beneath the bushy eyebrows, in the dark fierce eyes.

He answered the dwarf roughly, and sternly:—"Have a care, thou limb of Satan, how threats pass from thy lips to me; am I thy master's bondsman? By Saint Martin, if either is to wait the other's pleasure, methinks that honourable knight should attend on mine, considering what weighty affairs lie between us!"

These words, and the tone in which they were uttered, seemed to startle Fabian himself, amid all his pain and illhumour. "I cry thee, mercy," he said, "worthy master Guy, thou wouldst thyself scarce pause to choose thy words, wert thou in such pain as

I am; but tell me, I pray thee, how fares Sir Stephen's mission!"

"Did he bid thee ask that question, amid such a crowd of gaping knaves as are round us now, thou addle-brained dwarf?" replied the sailor fiercely; "however," he added, "I may tell thee, even here, it is but half successful."

"Alas, who shall say this to Sir Stephen," cried Fabian, with a lamentable groan, of which it seemed doubtful whether it was excited by his own sufferings, or an apprehension of his master's anger. Then, after a minute's pause, he said, "I pray thee, master Guy, see whether the storm has abated, that I may crawl from this vile eating-house, and seek a leech to dress these scalds!"

"Thou art in no condition to move: if Peter will suffer thee to remain here till the morning, which he may safely do, seeing thou art not likely to bring thy dagger again into request! And take honest advice for once, seeing that if thou dost adventure to bring this affair before the provost, it will sound but ill for thee, that thou didst provoke a blow of the hand with thy unmannerly tongue, and would'st have answered it with the stroke of a dagger!"

Peter having, by this time, partly overcome his

spleen, felt that the punishment which he had bestowed in his own fright upon the dwarf, was very sufficiently severe; be therefore suffered him to rest in a little inner room, and applied certain emollient ointments to his burns, after which he endeavoured to solace himself and his guests, for the loss of the ducks, with such other delicacies as he had previously prepared for their entertainment.

CHAPTER V.

WHITECHAPEL, in the days of Henry the Second, consisted but of a church, and a cluster of houses, surrounded by fields; from thence to Bow, only an occasional cottage, or stone built dwelling, belonging to some wealthy citizen, was to be seen, and beyond Stratford, then a small hamlet, the country grew wild and lonely, especially as it neared the, at that time, thick and extensive forest of Epping. The chase being the chief, and held as one of the most noble amusements of the great in those days, not only were the forests, which covered vast portions of the country, quite secure from the axe, but the sovereign, and the nobles, would sometimes depopulate large tracts, for the sole purpose of extending those dreary coverts, amid which the wild animals might multiply, as in the instance of the New Forest. This was done without the least regard for the sufferings of the people, who were

besides oppressed with the most cruel game laws. The loss of a hand, or an eye, according even to the decree of the famous King Canute, punishing the unfortunate churl, who, whatever might be his sufferings from hunger, ventured to appease them, with the dainty flesh of the buck, or the wild boar.

It was not very safe travelling in these forests, abounding as they did not only with stags, and boars, but with oxen in a savage state. Occasionally, too, in these woods, swine were herded for the wealthy, by peasants, whose huts were sometimes situated in the most dreary recesses of the forest.

It was a lovely morning in June, two days after Midsummer, that a youth and maiden, jauntily equipped and mounted, each on a stout bay pony, trotted briskly along the road between Stratford and Epping.

From the style of their appointments, it would have seemed that this pair, were either the son and daughter of some knight or gentleman of sufficient means, or of a well-to-do citizen: and so gay was the demeanour of the youth at least, that it could not be doubted that he was bent on a day's junketting. His extreme hilarity indeed had excited a reproof from his sister, when on pausing in the village of Stratford, to inquire their way, he would insist upon kissing the rosy cheeked damsel who gave the information, and after-

wards bestowed on her a mark to drink his health, an injunction with which she would not be perhaps the less willing to comply, inasmuch as the donor had himself the most pouting coral lips, the deepest blue eyes, and brightest golden hair on which youth of seventeen could ever pride himself. Then nothing could be better chosen, whether as to colour or form, than his vest of fine Kendal green cloth, with its silver cordings and buttons, fitting his lithe figure to such perfection, and the close cap or hood of the same material, edged with dark fur, contrasting with the shining curls that would fall beneath it, half shadowing his fair and joyous face. The long dagger too, or short sword dangling by his side, did not seem, if the wearer's bold and lively looks might be trusted, a mere ornamental appendage, while the mantle and small valise that were packed on the back of his saddle, showed that he was not unprepared either for a change in the weather, or a protracted journey.

His sister, if such were the damsel, was more gravely attired in a kirtle of the darkest shade of crimson, with a black boddice and sleeves slightly trimmed, like the youth's jerkin, with silver, glimpses only however of this garment were to be seen at intervals beneath the long descending and voluminous folds of the mantle of violet colour which the maiden wore,

with its hood drawn over her face, in a fashion which the heat of the day might be supposed to render somewhat unpleasant. The pair were now fast approaching the skirts of the forest, which in those days extended as far as the site of the present village of Woodford. A gigantic beech, or gnarled oak, clothed in the fresh green of early summer, threw frequently a pleasant shade over the road, while the scent of the violet, the honeysuckle, and the briar-rose, yet dripping with the morning dew, was wafted sweetly from the underwood. At this juncture it was, that the gay youth looked warily round him, anxious after all it seemed, lest there might be other travellers in sight. No shadow however was seen to cross the sunny way save those of himself and his companion. Released then from this apparent apprehension, the youth burst into a merry laugh, and addressing his fellow traveller, "I pray you!" he said, "most fearful and discreet sister of mine, vouchsafe in thy goodness, to say whether thou art resolved to keep that muffler across thy face until it smothers thee outright. There is no one near, and you may surely venture for a space to breathe this fresh air, that comes so sweetly from the woodland, instead of plodding thy way along half blind, with just one eye peering between the folds of thy detestable hood. I shall insist now that it be put back;

verily, it is a contempt of this fair scene to shut it out, such as one might look for from some pitiful burgher, who has no eye or thought save for his money bags, but not from a young maiden!"

With these words, the youth approached his pony close to that of his companion, and twitching back the envious hood, at once revealed the delicate features of Mabel Verneuil, dyed crimson with heat and apprehension.

"As I live Mabel!" exclaimed Rose, for it was no other than that sprightly damsel, who under the influence of that sentiment, so long after expressed by the gentle Rosalind, that "Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold!" had equipped herself "at all points like a man!" and who now startled by the appearance of her friend, continued "As I live Mabel, this jest suits thee not: have courage though, friend of mine, if only in pity to thy poor Rose, whose wild advice has led thee into this straight, but who will never forgive herself if it cause thee any ill, which indeed it can scarce do, if thou only bear up a brave heart. Let us dismount awhile, I pray thee, and rest under the shade of these pleasant trees, the weight of that mantle makes thee ill! I have as thou knowest, wherewith in my wallet, to revive these fainting spirits of thine!"

"It does not need, dearest Rose, thus to delay our journey!" replied Mabel; "bear I pray thee with my coward fears, and be thou assured whatever ill betides from my following thy counsel, I will neither blame thee for its bestowal, nor myself for taking it. Yet in truth, Rose, my heart beats thicker with every rood that we lessen between ourselves and the forest; all kinds of impossible mishaps fill my mind, I fear to be detected by Sir Aymer, to fall in with my uncle, and it may be more than all, the sight of some fair lady love of the false knight."

"Against detection by the knight, trust thou to thine hood, and to my assurance!" replied Rose, "for falling in with thy uncle, 'tis the unlikliest of all chances, and for the fair lady love, if she be fairer than thou art, I give thee full leave to hang thyself in despair!"

It was in vain, however, that with these kind of sallies, the lively Rose sought to support the spirits of her friend, who like many more, having acted upon a suspicion, dreaded only to find that it had been correct. The day was wearing towards noon, when the two maidens plunged beneath the umbrageous boughs of the forest, resolving to stop for rest and refreshment, as well as to endeavour to glean some news of Sir Aymer, at the first cottage they found in the

woods. They had not, however, proceeded far, when the sound of horns met their ears, and down a broad avenue of the forest came sweeping a gallant troop of hunters. On the approach of these persons, the maidens, unwilling, despite the masculine attire of Rose, to provoke observation, urged their ponies into a thick hazel copse, where, secure themselves from observation, they could see the company pass by. The timid Mabel, even though concealed in the thicket, again drew over her face the folds of her hood, but Rose looking through the long drooping garlands of bright green leaves, perceived at the head of the troop a stately looking person, mounted on a white horse, and wearing a suit of that vivid blue, produced in painting by the ultra marine; this garb of the finest cloth, was richly wrought with gold, and a kind of flat cap which the stranger wore, had drooping over its side a plume of white feathers. The rest of the company were attired in suits of that peculiar green so much in favour for the hunter of those days.

Rose remained perfectly still until the cavalcade had passed, when turning towards her friend with a voice and countenance much subdued, "Mabel," she said, "this is an ill hap for us, the king himself is at the head of these hunters, with the Princes Richard

and John, and that churlish knight, Sir Stephen, in their train!"

So deadly pale did Mabel turn at this announcement, that Rose, fearing that she would faint, sprung from her pony and approached her, bitterly condemning herself for having persuaded Mabel to risk an adventure to which she was evidently so unequal. "Yet be of heart, dear Mabel," she said, "it is little likely that in the extent of the forest we shall again encounter the king and his train, but we will at once seek out some swineherd's cottage, where we may obtain rest, and by chance some news of Sir Aymer, who, if the word of his ill-inclined cousin may be believed, visits Epping to-day, and our Lady protect us! who shall say that false knight has not a purpose in this hunting party, for all the world knows how he seeks to destroy his cousin with the king!"

"That may indeed be, Rose!" replied Mabel, "but as I own to thee that my heart sinks at the thought of trusting to thy disguise as a concealment, whether from prince or peasant, we will even as thou sayest seek some cottage where we may repose!"

In pursuit of this design, the young maidens, fearful of again immerging into the more open paths, pursued a devious way among the thickets. Nothing could be lovelier than that forest scene; the

changeful hues of the foliage, the light green of the giant oak, and more sombre tint of the widely spreading beech, both contrasted with the dark shining garlands of ivy that clung about their trunks, while the sun, piercing through the fantastic twine of their huge boughs, threw long lines of yellow light upon the turf beneath, starred with forest flowers, the bluebell, the daisy, and the sweet-scented woodbine; here, too, the trees were gathered in huge and frowning masses, and there, receding from a gentle declivity, they discovered some green sequestered glen, which might have been the very haunt of Oberon and his court.

Yet it was not without other fears than those excited by the apprehension of recognition, that the young maidens traversed these fair scenes; often, if the leaves rustled from the flight of a bird, they trembled lest they had aroused some wild boar or ox from his lair, and even the soft-eyed fawn, as it darted from its covert across some far-spreading glade, they regarded with terror, lest the hunters should turn upon its track.

They had not proceeded very far, before they arrived at one of those cottages inhabited by a swineherd which were scattered throughout the forest; it stood in a kind of open glade, belted with enormous oaks, the fruit affording in the autumn an ample pro-

vision for the hogs which were under the care of the owner of the cottage; on either side of which was a large shed, or pen, into which the animals were driven at night, many of whom Mabel and Rose now perceived grubbing about the trees for such sort of roots as instinct indicated as their proper food.

In spite of the miserable occupation of its owner, there was an air of cheeriness and comfort about the swineherd's dwelling, as it appeared on that bright summer day, the sunbeams glinting upon the mantle of ivy that had been encouraged to creep over its walls of rough hewn timber, making, with its closely woven wreaths, a screen alike from the summer's heat, and the winter's piercing cold, which had otherwise been too sensibly felt through the crevices of that poor log built cabin.

The whirr of a spinning wheel was heard above the sound of their ponies' hoofs upon the soft sod, as the two damsels approached, and in front of the hut they perceived an elderly woman seated with her distaff. The damsels requesting permission to rest, upon the plea of having lost their way amid the forest paths, she civilly offered them any service in her power.

"Of a truth, gentle youth!" she said, addressing Rose, as she assisted Mabel to dismount, "this fair sister of thine seems overwearied; my good man,

Leofric, will be home at sunset, and I would counsel ye to rest till his return, and when the moon is up, he will show you the way out of the forest, for it is ill journeying here for strangers, whether by night or by day, and most so for a youth and maiden so young and comely as yourselves!"

The courtesy of this worthy dame was but too acceptable to Rose and Mabel, who gladly followed her into the interior of the hut, where, upon a rudely constructed oaken table, Rose quickly spread the provisions which she had had the precaution to bring with her upon this indiscreet excursion: sparkling water from a near spring was furnished by their hostess, who, seldom tasting other fare than barley bread and bacon, joyfully accepted the invitation of the young strangers to partake of their roast chickens, white loaves, and wine.

As to the interior of this poor habitation, though its floor was only of earth beaten hard, and the chinks in the bare timbers of which the walls were constructed, wide enough to admit the hand, yet it had, from being cleanly swept, and the neat arrangement of the few necessary articles of furniture, and for cooking, and the deep red glow of the small but well kept peat fire that burned upon the hearth, an air of comfort little to be expected. The whole furniture,

indeed, of the place, consisted of a couple of benches and a table, two iron skillets for cooking, three drinking horns, and some wooden spoons, and trenchers.

The smoke from the fire escaped through a hole in the roof; as to the casement, there was none, unless a square opening in the wall, which admitted the light by day, and was closed by a shutter at night, could be called such. A rude partition divided this apartment from an inner sleeping-place.

Neither Rose nor Mabel were heroines of that ethereal cast, that they were beyond the reach of creature consolations, and it must be admitted that the fresh water, and the chickens, and the wine, and the rest in the cool leaf-covered hut after their long ride in the summer sun, wonderfully revived their spirits; so much so, indeed, that Rose, making a sign to her companion, would have proceeded to interrogate their hostess, when her design was forestalled by a remark made by the good woman herself.

"Truly, gracious youth!" she said, as Rose pressed upon her the remains of a manchet, "I fear my stomach will be spoiled before long for such plain fare as I and my poor Leofric can secure from our earnings; for we have had since Easter a weekly visit from some gallant young knight, high in favour with the

king, I warrant him, with his handsome face and courteous speech!"

Rose, and Mabel, at the first mention of a young knight, exchanged glances unperceived by their garrulous hostess. The draper's niece was speechless, concluding of course that no young knight, save the identical Sir Aymer de Montalt, could by possibility pay a weekly visit to the forest of Epping: but Rose, being rather more in possession of her senses, interrupted the dame with an inquiry as to the name of this young knight.

"That is the very matter, my pretty master, about which I can tell you nothing!" replied the woman; "this indeed is what Leofric says to me, 'Why Ebba,' says he, 'should you care to know the name of this generous knight since it pleases him to hide it: I warrant me the money he gives me for carrying into the depths of the forest his basket of fine meats, and wine, will not be the less use to us because we do not know his name, any more than the share he gives us of those meats is less savory!"

"A strange sport too for a noble knight," remarked Rose, "to carry weekly a basket of meat and wine into the depths of a great forest; I pray you, are they for the use of the wild oxen, or the birds of the air?"

"Oh no, my master!" answered Ebba; "these provisions are neither for bird, nor beast, but for one of the fairest ladies the sun ever shone upon!"

"Oh the deceiver!" exclaimed Rose; "it is some leman then, whom this wicked knight keeps concealed in the forest!"

"Nay, call him not wicked, my master," said Ebba, "it is a hard word for so gentle a knight, besides who knows, this lady had perhaps some cruel guardian or father, and may be she is the knight's wife!"

"She has at any rate a strange place of abode!" observed Rose; "of what fashion, I pray you, is her dwelling?"

"That also is more than I can tell," answered Ebba. "It is a long way into the forest that Leofric carries the basket, to the head of a lonely dell, and twice on arriving there, the lady appeared to welcome the knight, but from whence she came he knew not: once indeed he staid secretly to watch the knight, who went down into the dell and there disappeared suddenly, Leofric knew not how; though the next day he returned to the place, and sought carefully for any cavern or grot where the lady might be like to dwell!"

"And what manner of person is this knight him-

self?" inquired Rose, who was becoming very apprehensive that Sir Aymer was more quickly, and completely detected, than for Mabel's peace of mind she would have wished.

"A proper knight, my gentle master," returned Ebba; "ah, for all your own good looks, I believe, when you are his age you will scarce be more comely than he, with his fine brown curling hair, and dark bright eyes, and tall stately figure."

"And what I pray you are his equipments?" urged Rose; "I know most of the knights of King Henry; it is like I might guess at his name!"

"Nay, but it might hurt the noble knight, who is passing kind to us, if you knew him, my master, and were to tell his secret at the court;" replied Ebba, hesitating between her fear of injuring the knight, and her curiosity to know more about him.

"I promise thee, dame," answered Rose, "that the knight's secret will be safe in my keeping."

"When Leofric comes home he may perhaps tell you," returned Ebba; "he has gone now with the knight into the forest, and will be back at sunset with three marks and some dainty fare: and yet what can it hurt the knight if I say that I have noticed upon his breast the sign of a white dove?"

Mabel had controlled herself, and listened in silence, till the revelations of Ebba had reached this point, but now, uttering a deep sigh, she fell senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER VI.

When Mabel recovered her senses, she found herself extended on a pallet formed of moss and rushes, in the inner apartment of the hut. On either side of her stood the swineherd's wife, and her friend Rose.

"Our Lady be thanked, dearest Mabel," fervently ejaculated the latter, "you are yourself again; indeed the fatigue of our journey has been too much for you, and it will be well to take the offer of this kind woman, and remain here till to-morrow."

"No, no! I must go at once, at once!" cried Mabel, in a husky tone; "wherefore Rose," she said, turning a tearful but meaning look upon her friend, "should we now remain?"

"For this excellent reason, that you are at present unfit to mount your pony, my sister!" answered Rose; then bending down her head, "perverse one," she whispered, "I would have a word with you!"

A vague hope of some relief from the misery she suffered, made the poor Mabel lend a willing ear to the voice of Rose; and eager to converse with her alone, she hurriedly dismissed the woman Ebba, under the pretence that she might perhaps sleep, and that her brother would watch her. No sooner however, had the woman disappeared, than Mabel, bursting into a fit of passionate weeping, and clinging round the neck of her friend, exclaimed—"Now what will you tell me Rose, you see there is no hope; that I was weak and foolish, that my uncle was right, and Sir Aymer undeserving the love of a true heart!"

"It seems even so, my Mabel!" answered Rose, "but it is altogether a strange matter, what common lights' love would consent to live in so lonely, and, as it seems to us, miserable a manner; the mystery thickens so much, that I own it passes my divining, and I would have you stay till the return of the swineherd, if but in the hope that we may learn more from him, than is either known to, or acknowledged by his wife!"

"I fear me, Rose!" answered Mabel, smiling sadly through her tears, "that you would awaken in me a hope that Sir Aymer may yet be justified, that time will not fulfil; oh, I could find it in my heart to wed Sir Stephen himself, if our suspicions are borne out;

for the vilest of his qualities shall stand out as a shining virtue, in compare with the black perfidy of his cousin!"

"Find it not in thy heart to do any such foolish thing, my friend!" replied Rose; "for surely, if you do, time will furnish forth too ample means and matter for repentance: rather let Sir Aymer's falsehood cure thy heart of its love, which is but a disease when nourished for the unworthy!"

At this juncture, the conversation of the damsels was interrupted by a voice at the outer door, inquiring of Ebba the readiest road towards the centre of the forest; and in this voice to their utter consternation, they recognised that of the warden of the drapers himself. Immediately afterwards, they heard that of Gilbert, who was advising Fitz Alwyn to pause awhile for rest and refreshment.

"Truly Gilbert, I think I will follow thy counsel, which is not amiss," answered Fitz Alwyn. "I care not to meet with the king, since he has that perverse Sir Stephen in his train. I have no mind to hear his boasting, should his ill news be true; and though I dwell in the forest for a month, I will not leave it till I have developed this mighty mystery, which his cousin so closely guards. It is but seldom indeed, that I snatch a few days from my duties, either as a

craftsman, or a citizen, therefore I will even carry the matter out now; which I am the more disposed to do, that my niece and thy wayward Rose are quietly bearing each other company at Charing!"

"Quietly, forsooth!" ejaculated Gilbert, with a kind of groan, "our lady patroness, the Virgin, preserve us; I wish I could believe that Rose Waring would be quietly disposed at any time; though mistress Mabel is the most discreet of damsels, I would fear even for her sober bearing, while that crazed maiden keeps her company!"

Rose, who of course overheard every word of this speech, clenched her hand, and shook it in the direction of the outer apartment, as if she were in the best possible disposition to inflict some corporal chastisement on her offending lover, if he were but within her reach, but Mabel creeping closer to her, and pointing to a little aperture or window, similar to that in the outer apartment, softly whispered that she would not face either Gilbert or her uncle, and would avail herself of that window, to escape into the forest.

"But our ponies!" whispered Rose, whose courage was fast evaporating, at this near prospect of being called into action.

"They must go, though we return to London on foot!" answered Mabel; "besides we have money,

and may obtain a night's lodging in some other cottage!"

"Let it be so then!" replied Rose, still speaking under her breath, adding, as she crept towards the window, with a motion as cautious as that of an experienced mouser, "if we go, it were best at once!"

This determination of the errant damsels, to seek concealment in a speedy flight, was not at all deferred by their overhearing Ebba enter into a long detail respecting the pretty youth and maiden, who had that morning sought shelter in her cabin.

Shivering with apprehension, lest before they had effected their escape, they should see the rudely hung door, between the two apartments open, they with all the speed consistent with a profound silence, made their way towards the casement, which, small though it was, allowed an egress for their slender forms, and slipping through it, hand in hand, they made their way towards the thickest shades of the forest, forgetful of all other dangers, than that of a detection on the part of Gilbert, and the warden, and looking back at almost every second step to see if they were pursued.

CHAPTER VII.

The two damsels had proceeded perhaps about a mile, taking a direct line from the swine-herd's cottage, though the devious paths of the forest had doubled the distance. The beauties of the scene around them would not, had their minds been less disturbed, have passed unnoticed by the innocent maidens. Ever varying were the features of the woodland scene, here gigantic clumps of oak, beech, and elm shut out even the noon-day radiance, there the thick growth of underwood barred the passage, and anon there opened one of those lovely dells before alluded to. Upon the brink of one of these, Rose and Mabel paused for breath. Here the ground, sloping gently downwards covered with turf, smooth and soft as velvet, formed a kind of green bason, on the borders of which flourished the larger forest trees, while its bosom was

dotted with tufts of broom, now thickly covered with white and yellow blossoms, with hazel, hawthorn, and alder. The sound of a human voice, however, startled the maidens, as they were about to descend into this glade, and shrinking behind the trunk of an enormous oak, they sunk for very weariness upon the grass at its foot. The voice, meanwhile, went on in a grumbling, fretful kind of tone, the peculiarity of which so far overcame the fears of Rose, in her curiosity, that peeping cautiously from her covert, she perceived at a trifling distance, a little fat man, seated like herself and Mabel, beneath a spreading tree, and fanning himself industriously with a hood of purple cloth which he had taken from his head.

"Now be thine own judge, master Peter!" said the fat man, "admit now that if the good people do haunt the forest, as the churls tell us, that thou deservest that they should turn thee into a pig, a boar, or an animal yet more blundering and stupid, say even an ass: methinks indeed a pair of long ears would be a marvellous befitting ornament for this head of thine. Talk of chasing a wild goose, thou wouldst catch one, and kill it, and roast it in half the time that it shall take thee to get cool after this profitless expedition. What is it to thee, master Peter, that a dwarf should lay a scheme to cut the throat of a draper, must thou

therefore put thine own throat in peril? Sum up now the various deeds of thy folly, first thou must listen to the speech of that accursed dwarf with the sailor, truly it seemeth that listeners neither hear good of themselves, nor for themselves: then finding that the dwarf had knowledge of master Fitz Alwyn's intent to visit Epping to day, in company with the youth Gilbert, thou forsooth must leave thine own matters of soups and pasties, and finding that the warden had left his house before the dawn, set off in pursuit of him, mounted on a vile hack who fell dead lame on the road. And even this it seems could not make thee content to attend to thine own business, thou must walk in pursuit of the warden. Look at thyself Peter, consider, art thou a man fit for walking, are thy legs long enough, are thy feet hard enough, is thy body lean enough? Not at all, not at all?" concluded the speaker, shaking his head with a dolorous air: "And the most grievous part of the matter," he resumed, drawing a napkin from his pocket, with which he wiped a very round red face, "the most grievous part of the matter is in this, that thou hast missed the warden after all; yet doubtless he is in the forest, for that imp of a dwarf boasted too strongly of how his master, Sir Stephen, had defied Fitz Alwyn, with the tale of some evil doings of his cousin at Epping.

May the ducks be eternally confounded, that their sauce did not scald that vile dwarf enough to keep him at home for a month, instead of his being yesterday able to show his bandaged face abroad! And now, Peter, what art thou to do, thy blistered feet will carry thee no farther, and not a morsel of food hadst thou the discretion to bring with thee!"

With these words the cook leaned his head upon his hands, and fell into a fit of very melancholy musing.

Meantime the two damsels had not been uninterested listeners, the one in behalf of her uncle, and the other for her lover, and whether it was the intention of Fabian literally to cut Gilbert's throat or not, there was little doubt that he meditated to perhaps both the drapers some grievous injury.

As dwellers in the city, the person of the good-natured cook was known both to Rose and Mabel, besides which in the preparation of those banquets which Fitz Alwyn, as their warden, was in the habit of giving on holidays to the gild or company of drapers, the forerunners of the civic feasts for which London has been so famous, Peter the Gascon was often employed.

"I will trust this little cook not to betray us, either to Gilbert or thine uncle! even his company will be a

comfort to us, and I must know more of the intent of that vile dwarf!" said Rose to her companion; without waiting for whose assent, she rose from her seat, at the foot of the oak, and tripping across the turf, appeared suddenly before Peter, who absorbed in his hungry musings looked not up, till Rose awakened his attention by touching him lightly on the shoulder.

"Save you, master Peter," said the damsel; "if thou hast taken so weary a journey in behalf of Gilbert and his warden, thy honest nature will not let thee betray two poor damsels who put their trust in thee!"

The sudden apparition of Rose had, however, so completely confounded the cook, that clapping his hands before his eyes, and heedless of her speech, he threw himself back upon the turf, exclaiming in a lamentable tone: "The Virgin and all the saints be good unto me a poor unhappy sinner, for surely this is one of the elves, the fairies, whom I talked about: dressed all in green too; of a surety I am undone, spare me but this once, master fairy, let me be an ass upon two legs, not upon four!"

"One might think that at the present time thou wouldst hold four legs as an advantage, thou dull cook, seeing how sore weary thou hast fallen upon two!" said Rose, laughing in spite of her anxiety;

"but look up, master Peter, there is none here has power to make thee more of an ass than Nature herself has decreed! Here are but two poor maidens in as hard a hap as thyself!"

"That should be the voice of mistress Rose Waring!" said Peter, still pertinaciously keeping his face down upon the sod; "the very tones in which she said, 'thank you Peter, truly thy skill in shaping sugars is marvellous!' when I carried the box of confitures which she had ordered! and yet it may be merely a device of the elf!"

"The elf will try if there is not a device for awakening thy attention in the handle of this poniard, thou doting loon, if thou dost not look up and answer inasmuch as thou art capable, like a reasonable being!" cried Rose, out of patience, and pummelling the broad back of the cook, with the hilt of the weapon, as she spoke.

These blows, which to say truly were dealt with all the force of which she was mistress, very effectually served to convince master Peter that he had not to do with a purely spiritual being; therefore sitting up, he looked hard at Rose, rubbed his eyes, and looked hard again. "Truly!" he said at length, "I never knew till now that mistress Rose had a twin brother!"

"Twin brother, let it be then!" answered Rose, "but look you here Peter!" and she drew forward the unwilling Mabel, as she spoke, "master Fitz Alwyn's niece has had, as you may suppose, some full potent reason for venturing hither with no company save that of her friend Rose, or Rose's brother; and cares not that the warden should know of this little excursion!"

"Oh, cry you mercy, fair damsels!" said Peter, jumping up with a celerity not to be expected either from his robust form, or his complaints of weariness. "Is it not that the warden's niece, no less than the warden himself, has an interest in the bearing of Sir Aymer? Be you content, sweet ladies, be you content, trust Peter the Gascon with your mystery, and he will keep it as safe as though it were his own!"

On questioning the honest cook more closely, the maidens found that on the night of the accident which had befallen Fabian, the sailor, Guy, had remained at his kitchen, under a pretence of friendly service to the dwarf, but in truth to hold with him a long conference, to which Peter chose without intimating to the confederates any such intention, to make himself an ear witness. Much that was of a mystery too deep for him to fathom did the cook overhear, of certain purposes of Sir Stephen which the sailor was to have

executed in his late visit to Gascony, but in which he had very materially failed. Of greater import, however, in the mind of Peter, was the bitter malice with which Fabian spoke not only of Gilbert, but of the warden Fitz Alwyn, as one inclined, he said, unduly to favour the roysterer Sir Aymer, adding, with a fiendish chuckle that his master would take order for the good will which the draper and his pretty niece bore to that unlucky knight; finally, Peter found that it was agreed between the two worthy associates that they should meet again at his kitchen on the night after Midsummer, when Fabian flattered himself with having some news about the draper. As to Peter, it may be believed that the dwarf did not leave him out of his amiable calculations, in consideration of the favour of the stewed ducks: but the arrear of wrath for him was to be set over for payment at some future opportunity.

Though it seemed advisable to ascertain in what particular mode Fabian expected to carry out his purposes against the two drapers, Peter nevertheless, betook himself at an early hour on the following morning, to the house of Fitz Alwyn, but unfortunately, he had already quitted home, in company with Gilbert, to transact some business that detained him till late on the succeeding night; on the next day he set off for

Epping, too early to be seen by Peter, who had gleaned from the converse between Fabian and the sailor on their second meeting, that it was at Epping that the mischievous plans of the dwarf were expected to ripen.

Peter, having thus explained the friendly purpose of his own journey, an earnest consultation was held by the damsels as to the course now most proper for them to pursue. Mabel, in very sober sadness, considered that the revelations of Ebba as to Sir Aymer were all sufficient, that it was indeed worse than vain for her uncle and Gilbert to risk any possible annoyance from two beings so malicious as Sir Stephen and his dwarf, on behalf of that false knight, and that however painful the measure, it would but be the conduct of discreet damsels, if herself and Rose were to return forthwith to the hut of the swineherd, acknowledge their own imprudence, tell all that they had themselves learned of Sir Aymer, and all that Peter had gleaned of the designs of his cousin, and thus prevent Gilbert and the warden, from falling into the snare which it was likely that the malice of the dwarf and his master, had prepared for them. The hitherto daring Rose was now however the timid and reluctant party, and it was only by reminding her from how imminent a danger she might rescue her

lover, that Mabel could persuade her to risk appearing before him in her present garb.

"Gentle mistress Rose!" said Peter, laughing, as, almost forgetting his weariness in the prospect of food and rest at the swineherd's cottage, he once more jumped up from the grassy bank on which he had been fain to seat himself during the dispute between the damsels, "it will not to my mind behove the youth Gilbert to take any exceptions at the manner of your garb, considering that but for its adoption, you had not ventured into the forest, which had you not ventured, we had never had this apt meeting, which had we not had, the warden, and master Gilbert, would get no warning of the intents of Sir Stephen and his dwarf!"

"And wherefore needs it," cried another voice, interrupting the oratory of the cook, "that the fair Rose should heed the carping humour of a wretched craftsman, when princes are willing to court her smiles?"

So saying, Prince John, for he was the speaker, spurred his horse into the thicket, where, in company with some three or four attendants, who had with himself been separated from the main body of the hunters, he had overheard all the latter portion of the conversation between the maidens, and Peter the

Gascon. Both Rose and Mabel were at the moment, too completely paralysed by the sudden appearance of the prince, to seek safety in flight; while Peter stood with his mouth open, and his eyes expanded, in a kind of awe-stricken astonishment. Short pause, however, was made by Prince John, at a sign from whom, one of the attendants seized Rose, and placed her, despite her screams and struggles, on his horse; nor was it any fault of the Prince, that he did not also secure the person of Mabel, but, that young maid, remembering that he was a fast friend of Sir Stephen, before he was well out of the thicket, turned and fled into the depths of the forest, with the fleetness of one of its own fawns.

The loud shout of the prince, and his attendants, still rung in her ears, long after the intricacies of the blind paths which she took in her terror, had effectually sheltered her from their pursuit. Breathless, exhausted, like the poor hart pursued by the hunter, the maiden was at last compelled to pause. Cold drops of dew coursed each other down her face, her knees knocked together, her cheeks and lips were pale. The sun, which was now sinking rapidly in the western sky, was embosomed in a rich mass of purple and crimson cloud, reflecting a rosy tint upon the tops of the tall forest trees: while below, the thin blue mists of

evening, creeping lazily upward, had already spread the underwood with a veil, which as it thickened, invested the scene with a kind of ghostly obscurity; amid which seemed, to the excited fancy of the lonely maiden, to move shadowy and doubtful forms.

The features of that portion of the forest indeed, to which Mabel had now penetrated, were themselves of a character awful and imposing. A long avenue of tall elms terminating in a wide but irregular space dotted over with huge clumps of oak, and closed on all sides by dense woods, among whose topmost boughs the rising wind now crept with a melancholy murmur, while the last rays of the sun faded from the rich saffron, to a faint purple hue, which gradually drew off, and left the whole scene involved in a dim obscurity. The spirits of Mabel now quite failed, and sinking at the foot of a tree, she wept bitterly.

The prospect of passing a mild summer night in the woods, would have had it is true nothing in it very terrible, even to a delicately nurtured maiden, but for the wild animals with which they abounded, and still worse, the chance of falling into the hands of any of the desperate robbers, from which no forest in those days was free.

Overwhelmed with these dreadful apprehensions, Mabel felt therefrom, even a more urgent necessity to

rise and pursue her way, trusting that a fortunate chance might yet guide her steps to the hut of some swineherd: to attempt to retrace her way to that of Leofric, she felt would be useless.

Meanwhile, as she passed with quick steps, along the edge of the oak-covered glade, in the hope of finding some open path, the gentle sound of running water met her ears, and turning a little to the left, she perceived a brook shining through the darkness. As she followed its course, she found that it gradually widened, brawling its way between somewhat steep banks, covered with smooth turf on their summits, and fringed on their descent, even to the water's edge, with dwarf shrubs. Along these banks the shrinking maiden pursued her way, as speedily as the fast coming darkness would permit: looking anxiously and vainly for the glimmering of a light between the trees, to betoken one of those cottages which she sought. The increasing noise of the water, as Mabel still passed on, convinced her that she was approaching a fall of the brook, the banks still growing steeper at every step, but faint and wearily, she was still pursuing her way, when a horrible bellowing was heard, and even amid the thick falling obscurity, she perceived two wild bulls burst from their covert, and course each other madly along the opposite bank of the stream. It

needed not this sight to sum up the terrors of the lonely maiden, but roused by it to a kind of frenzy, she fled she knew not how through the darkness, till her foot slipping on the moist turf, she fell headlong down the bank into the stream, just sensible of the coldness of its waters, ere she lost all consciousness.

CHAPTER VIII.

A voice soft even as that of her friend Rose, but speaking in a strange tongue, was in the ears of Mabel, when she again awoke to consciousness. Looking round, she found herself in a small, low roofed apartment, richly hung with crimson; thick carpets were spread upon the floor, the couch upon which she was extended was composed of soft and costly furs, and on a table near it, stood a lamp, and a vase filled with scented waters, which had apparently been employed to recover her from her swoon. Her sole attendant was a lady, so passing fair, that the story of Ebba, flashed like lightning upon Mabel's recollection. Yet her beauty was of a cast as different from that of the maiden herself, as from any that she had ever seen; her stature approached the majestic, her fine acquiline nose and curved lips, might have worn too severe an expression of command, had they not been tempered

by the liquid lustre of the large black eyes that seemed to swim beneath the long silken lashes. Her complexion was the purest tint of olive, with a glow like that of the damask rose. The dress of this stranger was at once simple and magnificent, a voluminous robe of thick yellow silk, a sash of purple and gold, and a turban of the last named material, beneath which fell redundant tresses, black and glossy, as the raven's wing.

The wet garments of Mabel had, during her swoon, been changed by this stranger for a habit of green silk, and though her language was unknown to the draper's niece, it was impossible to misunderstand the meaning of her soft tones and benevolent looks. Motioning the maiden to keep still upon the couch, she raised a curtain opposite to it, and passed through an arched doorway, leading, it appeared, to an outer apartment, and presently returned with a small tray, bearing confections, bread, and wine, which she offered to Mabel with an air of the sweetest solicitude. Now was the trial for Mabel; she could not doubt that this very stranger was the cause of Sir Aymer's visits to the forest, and with that thought the maiden shrunk even from her kindness; yet how was it possible to make for it a harsh return? her life even had the stranger saved, though as yet she knew not how; and

what recked the lady of Sir Aymer's falsehood? doubtless he had not told her of the vows which he had so often breathed in Mabel's ear. Under the influence of these conflicting feelings, tears rose to the poor maiden's eyes as she accepted the stranger's attentions, and by signs, that universal language, she sought to make known her desire to depart; while the stranger, on her side, was at no less trouble to intimate that the hospitality of her dwelling was open for Mabel's acceptance: any movement, however, on the maiden's part to approach the entrance of the chamber, she seemed disposed to resist with a degree of severity inconsistent with the general kindness of her manner. While this sort of dumb discussion still proceeded, the tinkling sound of a small bell was heard, and the lady with a stern look of her brilliant eyes, intimating that Mabel was to remain in her present position, left the apartment, taking the precaution to draw across the outer side of the curtain some piece of furniture, which the damsel would have found it impossible to remove without both noise and trouble. Oppressed by an agitation beyond her powers of control, and an apprehension of some immediate and unknown calamity, Mabel on the departure of her strange hostess, sat up on the couch, vainly clasping her hands over her throbbing heart: but who

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Meantime, his conference with the stranger lady seemed not that of two happy lovers, her tones by turns were passionate and mournful, and once Mabel flattered herself that there might be on her account some slacking of Sir Aymer's love for the beautiful stranger: but suddenly the latter gave utterance to so wild a burst of lamentation, which Sir Aymer sought to soothe in terms of such soft compassion, that Mabel, convinced that it could have no reference to herself, vainly endeavoured to surmise its cause.

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It was, however, with him a matter of real import to penetrate this mystery, and that office of dogging Sir Aymer, which was so stoutly refused by Eustace, was, it may be supposed, as willingly accepted by the villainous Fabian; who watched the knight and the swineherd to the entrance of that lonely dell spoken of by Ebba, and there also lost all trace of him, as Leofric had done before.

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Fitz Alwyn, however, whose cheerful temper led him to regard all things with the eye of hope, insisted that it was more probable that Rose, and Mabel, if they were the wanderers, would but conceal themselves in the wood till such time as they might hope that himself and Gilbert had pursued their way, and then return to the hut, and wait for Leofric, to guide them to the forest's skirts, as had been proposed between them and Ebba. Under this impression, the warden and Gilbert commenced a vigorous search in the woods that surrounded the cottage, but after prolonging it till the sun began to sink, and again repairing to the hut, to ascertain from Ebba, whether the maidens had presented themselves there, and finding they had not, they were forced upon the painful conclusion that Rose and Mabel had penetrated farther in the forest, in the mazes of which they would certainly lose themselves, and perhaps even be slain by some wild animal. The warden, however, still clung to the hope, either that these wanderers were not Rose and Mabel, or that if they were, they had by this time resumed the road to London.

"Trust not, at least to that, I pray you, sir!" answered Gilbert; "you admit it likely, that heedless Rose has urged mistress Mabel on some wild scheme,

what recked the lady of Sir Aymer's falsehood? doubtless he had not told her of the vows which he had so often breathed in Mabel's ear. Under the influence of these conflicting feelings, tears rose to the poor maiden's eyes as she accepted the stranger's attentions, and by signs, that universal language, she sought to make known her desire to depart; while the stranger, on her side, was at no less trouble to intimate that the hospitality of her dwelling was open for Mabel's acceptance: any movement, however, on the maiden's part to approach the entrance of the chamber, she seemed disposed to resist with a degree of severity inconsistent with the general kindness of her manner. While this sort of dumb discussion still proceeded, the tinkling sound of a small bell was heard, and the lady with a stern look of her brilliant eyes, intimating that Mabel was to remain in her present position, left the apartment, taking the precaution to draw across the outer side of the curtain some piece of furniture, which the damsel would have found it impossible to remove without both noise and trouble. Oppressed by an agitation beyond her powers of control, and an apprehension of some immediate and unknown calamity, Mabel on the departure of her strange hostess, sat up on the couch, vainly clasping her hands over her throbbing heart: but who

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"But when went they?" inquired Fitz Alwyn; "this worthy dame tells us that she will swear they were in the inner room of the cot when we arrived. Mayhap they have merely stepped into the woods on some frolic, and will be here anon!"

"Hope it not, warden, hope it not!" returned Gilbert bitterly. "Doubtless our coming was the cause of their flight, they shamed to see us, well in truth they might, the false, bold wenches! It may be indeed, they will have sense to return forthwith to London, but good lack, that is sooner said than done, how like are they again to lose their way, in the mazes of this frightful forest!"

Fitz Alwyn, however, whose cheerful temper led him to regard all things with the eye of hope, insisted that it was more probable that Rose, and Mabel, if they were the wanderers, would but conceal themselves in the wood till such time as they might hope that himself and Gilbert had pursued their way, and then return to the hut, and wait for Leofric, to guide them to the forest's skirts, as had been proposed between them and Ebba. Under this impression, the warden and Gilbert commenced a vigorous search in the woods that surrounded the cottage, but after prolonging it till the sun began to sink, and again repairing to the hut, to ascertain from Ebba, whether the maidens had presented themselves there, and finding they had not, they were forced upon the painful conclusion that Rose and Mabel had penetrated farther in the forest, in the mazes of which they would certainly lose themselves, and perhaps even be slain by some wild animal. The warden, however, still clung to the hope, either that these wanderers were not Rose and Mabel, or that if they were, they had by this time resumed the road to London.

"Trust not, at least to that, I pray you, sir!" answered Gilbert; "you admit it likely, that heedless Rose has urged mistress Mabel on some wild scheme,

my life ont if it be so, nothing less than the sight of the glen, dame Ebba talks of, would content her, let us then proceed, I pray you, to our meeting with the dwarf, the saints forefend that he should be encountered by those foolish maidens!"

Fitz Alwyn having no proposal more worthy of consideration to offer, he set out with Gilbert for the spot where they were to meet the dwarf, a glade called the "Nine Beeches," because it was a partially open space, on which grew nine of the above-named trees, of great age and magnitude. This spot was well known to Fitz Alwyn, who had often visited it before, though it lay towards the heart of the forest. As they now proceeded thither, at a rapid pace, the long crimson rays of the sun fell slantingly across the path, betokening that it was near its decline. This was observed by Gilbert. "I think warden!" said he, "that it is long past the hour at which we were to meet the dwarf, and should suppose that the malicious elf would give us the slip, but that it will rather better perhaps serve the purpose of his spite, to lead us into ill blood with Sir Aymer!"

Such reply as the warden might have made to this suggestion, was interrupted by a lamentable cry or shriek, that passed along the evening breeze, and was seemingly uttered at no great distance. At that

sound, Fitz Alwyn and Gilbert simultaneously stopped, and looked shudderingly at each other, as if each dreaded to give tongue to his fears. After a brief pause, the cry was again heard, lingering on the air with a more prolonged and piteous cadence.

"The saints be praised!" ejaculated the warden, wiping away the cold perspiration, that had broken out upon his brow: "that is no female voice!"

"I think not!" replied Gilbert, with a sigh, as if he too were profoundly relieved.

"It seems however, to lie before us," resumed the warden, "and is surely uttered by some person in great pain, or distress; let us quicken our steps, I pray you!"

It should have been before observed, that Gilbert and the warden were on foot, having left the horses that brought them from London, to be baited at the town, or village of Epping. They had now reached the glade of the beeches, but could perceive no traces of Fabian, while the melancholy cry of distress still at intervals filled the air, seeming now a little to the left. A narrow path presenting itself in the direction whence the sounds seemed to come; they hesitated not to follow it, and soon arrived in that fairy glade, where Rose and Mabel had surprised Peter the Gascon, nearly two hours before. The cry was now heard with

painful distinctness, and the last ray of the sun slanting over the open ground, while it left the figures of the warden and Gilbert, invested with the thin vapours that had risen in the matted woods from which they issued, fully revealed to them on the other side of the glade, the figure of a man bound to a tree, and from whom proceeded those doleful cries.

The light and slender form of Gilbert, of course enabling him to outstrip the warden, he had by the time the latter had crossed the glade, cut the thongs which bound the sufferer to the tree, who proved to be no other than the unfortunate cook, Peter the Gascon.

"Beware! beware!" he cried, recognizing Gilbert as he approached, "the wasps! master draper, the wasps!"

Indeed, on coming close to the cook, Gilbert perceived hovering over his head eight or ten of those vicious insects, by whose stings his face had been swelled out of all proportion, while his hands were securely bound, by thongs of the same discription, as those which fastened his body to the tree.

Whisking these noxious creatures away with his kerchief, at the risk of their settling on his own person; Gilbert at the same time drew out a knife, with which he released the unfortunate Peter. By this time the warden had come up.

"Why Peter!" he exclaimed, "what in the name of all the saints, has brought thee into this plight?"

"Thee and thy affairs, master warden," groaned the cook, as he rocked himself backwards and forwards in the excess of his pain. But Peter's repetition of his reasons for journeying to the forest may be spared, and his relation resumed at the point when Rose was seized by Prince John and his attendants.

"And then!" continued the maltreated Peter, "no sooner had they mounted mistress Rose upon one of their horses, than out came that villainous Fabian from the prince's train, with his visage all plastered over the scalds which I verily wish had stript the flesh from his bones: and enters he forthwith into a long lying tale of the wrongs which he had received from master Gilbert and from me, and for Gilbert, he said, expecting him in the forest to-day, he had prepared a revenge, which might serve also for me, and which he deemed that his grace the prince would not choose but approve of. At once then, under the command of that ill conditioned devil, was I bound as you found me to a tree, and out of his pouch he takes two boxes, one filled with honey, to smear over my face, and the other with some dozen wasps, which the imp boasted that he had caught this morning; and may I die if that vile prince and his servants, did not laugh

to see him set on me the pestilent insects, and ride away leaving him mocking and dancing, and asking me whether the wasps' sting might not compare with scalding soup!"

"Ride away, and with Rose in their company?" exclaimed Gilbert, who had with difficulty commanded patience, to hear out this long detail,

"And my niece, Mabel, which path did she take?" demanded Fitz Alwyn.

"Mistress Mabel fled by yonder path!" answered the cook, indicating the direction which she had taken, "and by the avenue to the left; Prince John and his men carried away mistress Rose!—and holloa—master Gilbert, worthy warden, whither go you? look for a needle in a bottle of hay! look for it in a stack, and you shall find it sooner than those you seek in this forest! So this is friendship, I suppose," concluded the cook, as Gilbert and Fitz Alwyn, unheeding his adjurations, set off at a rapid pace in different directions, the one intent only on the condition of his betrothed, and the other on that of his niece.

The unfortunate Peter, at first essayed to follow the warden, but he was too foot sore, too stiff from his bonds, and really too exhausted by want of food, and the pain of the stings upon his face. Quite dispirited, he sunk again at the foot of a tree, exclaiming angrily,

"May I be skewered like a capon, and roasted alive at mine own kitchen-fire, if ever I interfere for lover, or guardian more. If I had only water to wash my face, or a morsel of food: that indeed is my worst strait, it may suit lovers to go without food, it may suit damsels, it may suit wardens, but it does not suit cooks!"

The dews however, now beginning to descend fast, Peter collected a quantity of the wet herbage, with which he first wiped the honey from his face, and by binding the dripping leaves over it, found considerable relief from the pain of the wasp stings.

Thus partially relieved, he endeavoured to retrace the path by which he had entered the forest in the morning, and was eventually so fortunate, as to reach the cottage of the swineherd Leofric, where he was kindly entertained for the night, these good people also expressing great anxiety for the fate of the two damsels, the warden and Gilbert, exposed as they probably were, to the chances of a night in the forest.

CHAPTER X.

MEANWHILE Sir Aymer conducted his unknown charge for near an hour through the devious paths of the forest.

"Lady!" he said at length, "we now approach a hunting-house of the king, where his grace, with the queen, and some of his courtiers, spends the night: to the charge of a gentlewoman of the royal Eleanor's train I shall commit you; may I once more express a hope that you will pardon the discourteous necessity which compels me to keep myself concealed from a gentle damsel, to whom I rejoice in having rendered a slight service!"

As the knight spoke he paused at the gate of the hunting-lodge, which he had now reached, and struck upon its portal bell.

"Sir Aymer de Montalt!" answered Mabel, still *disguising* her voice, "this mystery is useless, you

are already known. But fear not, sir knight, your secret is safe with me: all I ask in return for my promise never to reveal what I have seen, is that you forthwith conduct me yourself into the presence of the king."

At finding himself known, the knight, however much surprised, was but very little pleased. He had no resource, however, but to assent to the lady's request, especially as the gates of the court-yard were at that moment thrown open to them.

The evening banquet had been already served, and with the wine-cup before them, the king and his courtiers were discussing the events of the morning's chase. One, however, of the guests suffered it again and again to pass untasted, while an expression of absolute despair lowered on his features.

"Heaven's grace, Master Fitz Alwyn!" said Henry, at length addressing the warden, who having found himself, after a weary and fruitless search for his niece, near the king's hunting-house, had repaired thither; "heaven's grace! take heart; if I fell in so opportunely with the youth Gilbert, and my mad springald of a son, while they were so stoutly disputing the possession of the damsel Rose, doubt not that some chance as fortunate, has furnished the fair Mabel with a lodging for the night!"

"Trust to that hope, we pray thee, master warden!" said the haughty Eleanor, who was touched beyond her wont, by Fitz Alwyn's distress.

At this moment it was that the king's chamberlain announced Sir Aymer de Montalt, and a veiled lady, as praying an audience of the king.

"It was that knight's duty to have been present with his cousin Sir Stephen at our banquet!" cried the queen in a severe tone: "but I pray you, my lord, let him have entrance, and we will ourselves question him as to this mystery which he preserves with master Fitz Alwyn, while pretending to the hand of his niece."

"Ah your grace!" cried the hypocritical Sir Stephen, "spare my cousin I pray you, he is but young!"

"Nay, Sir Stephen!" replied the queen, "if we spare him in his remissness of duty towards ourselves, think not he shall be forgiven, if aught of ill this night befalls the fair Mabel Verneuil!"

"Tarry in thy wrath awhile our Eleanor!" cried the king, "till we see who is this muffled dame, whom the knight brings so boldly into our presence!"

In entering the royal chamber, Mabel dropped the veil and bandage which she had previously loosened, the sudden glare of light however dazzled her eyes, and she did not therefore perceive Sir Aymer's wild

start, and look of profound despair, when from the removal of the drapery, he learned that it was to her, from whom he would most carefully have concealed it, that his fatal secret had become known.

The cold and disdainful air too with which Mabel waved him aside, and passed on unsupported to the dais on which the royal pair were seated, too well told him that all was lost, and slowly he followed her in an excess of grief, which left him no room to think of the triumph which the present scene was to furnish to his base cousin.

"Thrice welcome to our presence, fairest Mabel!" cried the king, the moment he perceived who was approaching. "Now then, master Fitz Alwyn," he continued, turning towards the latter, "own our speech sooth; said we not that heaven would guide thy niece to some honourable guard?"

"My child! my dear Mabel!" cried Fitz Alwyn, forgetting to blame the damsel's imprudence in the joy of once more beholding her in safety, "what fortunate chance has released thee from the perils of the forest?"

"Be content, my uncle!" returned Mabel; "the chance was fortunate, and spare to ask me how I was favoured with the protection of Sir Aymer de Montalt, who, in the presence of my lieges, the king and queen,

I am bound to avow, has conducted me in all honour through the woods."

"Then we nothing doubt, mistress Mabel!" said Henry, who had always been disposed somewhat to favour Sir Aymer above his cousin, "that this fair knight has in all honour also made known to thee that mystery which has put him in ill grace, not only with thy uncle the warden, but with our puissante Eleanor herself!"

"Nay, my liege!" cried the queen, who had closely watched, and better understood, the cold tones of Mabel, and the downcast looks of the knight, "we deem that our true Sir Stephen has yet the better chance for gentle Mabel's favour. Is it not so, mistress?"

"Alas! the day, royal lady!" exclaimed Mabel, "thy judgment is indeed too just for my weak heart. But I have never word for Sir Aymer more!"

"Said I not so?" cried Sir Stephen, in an exulting tone. "Now ask thy niece, master warden, whether I tinted in shades too dark, the treachery of yon shame to knighthood. Look, look at him, my lord the king! he trembles, he turns pale: he lacks words even to gloss his guilt! And thou, sweetest Mabel!" continued Sir Stephen, addressing the damsel, "if my

cousin could be falser than thou thought'st, may I not be more true?"

"I know not!" replied Mabel in a distracted tone, "appearances are indeed dark, dark against Sir Aymer!"

"Blessings on thee, gentle Mabel, for the doubt which even those harsh words imply!" cried Sir Aymer; "yet allow me time, only time, and my honour, now so foully stained, shall appear white as new drifted snow!"

"Allow thee time, spendthrift, deceiver?" exclaimed Sir Stephen, with a bitter sneer; "time that the fair Mabel may still trifle with an honest heart, and expose herself on thy behalf to new perils? My royal mistress, master warden, in justice to the maiden herself, impose on her your commands, that she no more waste her beauty in trusting to the vain oaths of this false knight!"

"There needs no such haste, Sir Stephen!" said the king, either for the warden or the damsel to pass thee their word; let the gentle Mabel recount to us her adventures of the night, when we may be able to pronounce with a more nice judgment whether Sir Aymer merits the severe fate to which you would condemn him!"

"Spare me, gracious king!" exclaimed the maiden,

bursting into tears, as she fell at the monarch's feet. "By so strange a hap was my life this night preserved, that, though I know not if Sir Aymer were concerned in my rescue, yet a seal for his secret, which no lips save his own can remove, is for ever placed upon mine. I know not if, after all which has passed to-night, he will still say that he loves me, but if he will not unveil the cruel mystery which has even thickened on his actions, let him mock me with his vows no more!"

"If I love you, Mabel!" exclaimed the unfortunate young knight, unheeding the sneering looks of the courtiers, the severity written on the countenances of the king, the queen, and the warden, and more than all, the kind of wild devilish triumph in that of his cousin, "if I love you! oh Mabel, trust me, trust me only for a few poor months, and not only your doubts, but the sneers even of yon scoffer, shall be silenced for ever!"

With the last words the knight had directed his eyes towards Sir Stephen, who exclaimed, scornfully,

"I call the Virgin to witness, that though thou art of mine own blood, it were shame for a true knight to cross swords with thee, else would I hale thee to the forest this very hour, and the morning sun should shine on thy corpse or mine!"

This last taunt promised to destroy the fortitude of

Sir Aymer, and forgetful even of the royal presence, he half drew his sword from its scabbard, and sprung fiercely towards his cousin. Prince Richard, however, was in time to restrain his arm, and the stern voice of Henry exclaiming: "Ho guards here! for the traitors who would draw swords in our presence!" recalled his forbearance, and casting himself at the king's footstool ere the guard had closed around him, he cried, "Pardon, my gracious liege, the sword which has hitherto been drawn only in your service, were indeed defiled in measuring with that of the base recreant who screens his own falsehood by imputing it to me. That which the love of woman denies to me, I pray from the justice of my king: a few months, my liege, but a few months, to sever the toils which now enwrap me!"

"And a few months longer to hold the fair Mabel in the suspense of his false vows!" said the queen; "ah, my lord, he is of our household, but we yield him to thy justice, spare him not!"

"Fear not, our royal dame," replied Henry, "though we own a foolish will towards granting the prayer of this accused knight, yet we dare not suggest a like forbearance to master Fitz Alwyn!"

"Of a truth, sire!" said the warden, "it seemeth that it would be well for my niece were I indeed to

lay on her my command to accept the hand of Sir Stephen!"

"And you, Mabel!" exclaimed the young knight, "oh beware, if I loved not honour more than life, it were easy in this hour to make known my truth! Oh, under the influence of a miserable delusion, be not wrought upon to give yourself to my false, false cousin!"

To this last appeal Mabel made no reply, but leaning upon the arm of the warden, hid her face and wept.

"My royal father!" now said Prince Richard, who with a generous sympathy had watched the earnest looks and tones of Sir Aymer: "the fair Mabel seemeth in no mood to make Sir Stephen at the present time a willing bride; what if your grace grant Sir Aymer the delay which he beseeches, and if when it has lapsed, he make not light these dark mysteries, the fair Mabel do then in your royal presence, where both the knights shall appear, give her hand to Sir Stephen!"

"By heaven's truth, Richard, thou hast spoken well!" cried Henry; "how say you, master warden, shall your niece hold herself prepared to wed Sir Stephen, if, by the merry Yule tide, his cousin show not himself the worthier knight?"

"Your grace yields Sir Aymer a fair time, at least!"

said the queen and Prince John in a breath, for they were both prejudiced against that knight: but Henry replied in the tone which showed that he would exercise his own kingly will.

"Not so, son John, not so dame Eleanor. Foul and unknightly is the bearing of one or the other of these kinsmen, and neither can murmur if we allow them six months to prove their truth or to repent their falsehood. How say you, master warden, does this matter meet your pleasure!"

"'Tis judged with all the wisdom of your grace!" answered Fitz Alwyn, "and at the Yule tide the hand of my niece Mabel, shall be given to Sir Stephen, if his cousin prefer not then the better claim!"

At these words the damsel raised her head, and looked wildly in her uncle's face as if she would have deprecated his resolve; but Sir Aymer, in a tone of hope as confident as his cousin's had lately been in triumph, exclaimed, "Fear not, fear not, beloved Mabel, with mine own hand will I give thine to my cousin, if by the Yule tide I do not prove myself the truest lover, and more honourable knight!"

Sir Stephen would have complained of this decree, but Henry said in a severe tone—

"Peace on our command, Sir Stephen, or we shall deem thou hast no honest reason for thy murmurs,

Go to, is this our English land, and shall we not give an accused man time to show his innocence? by our father's soul, we would not deny such justice to the meanest churl. Remember then, Sir Aymer, we grant thee till the Yule tide; and you my lords, and noble dames," continued the king, addressing his courtiers, and the ladies of the queen who were present, "prepare you to make merrier that merry time, by a brave wedding feast held at our seat of Westminster!"

CHAPTER XI.

Six months had rolled by, six months, fleet or weary in their course, even as they passed in wretchedness or joy. With a sickening heart had Mabel Verneuil watched the changing seasons, the green leaves becoming sear and red, and falling dry and withered from the boughs that bore them. "Thus!" whispered the maiden, "have my hopes been blighted, and oh, a grave beneath the sod, now heaped with those withered leaves, were better than to live the bride of Sir Stephen!"

The maiden's hope indeed, that Sir Aymer would be in a condition to claim her hand at the Yule season, was but faint. For some weeks after the eventful scenes at Epping, Mabel had, day by day, flattered herself, that Sir Aymer, not waiting for the time appointed, would declare to her the mystery of his con-

nexion with the strange lady of the forest. But the knight, implicitly observing a promise made to the warden after their interview at the king's hunting seat, made no attempt, whatever, to discourse with the maiden; and the petulant Rose Waring, encouraged the jealous anger, the expression of which Mabel could not altogether restrain, while still more to exasperate her feelings, Sir Aymer, towards the end of October, disappeared from London, and went no one knew whither: having prayed permission from the queen, to be spared awhile from his duties in her court. Absenting himself as he thus did, without word, or sign to herself, it was but a poor consolation to the forlorn Mabel, that her friend Rose, seizing Gilbert in an unusually gracious humour, persuaded him to visit Epping, where he learned that Sir Aymer had discontinued his journies to the forest; for Mabel thereupon, concluded that wherever her lover might be, that fair dame whom she had herself seen in the forest, was in his company.

Honours, in the meantime, had thickened on the head of the worthy warden of the draper's gild. Raised a step above the dignity which his father, Leofstane, had enjoyed as the Provost of London, Henry Fitz Alwyn, had been chosen as its First Lord Mayor: and was continually re-elected to hold that

honourable office, for the long period of twenty-four years.

The excellent draper was not without his little weakness, and vanities; and beholding smiles, once more illumine the pallid countenance of Mabel, as she congratulated him on his new dignities, he began to hope that her remembrance of Sir Aymer was becoming less bitter, and that at the approaching feast of Christmas, she would cheerfully bestow her hand on his cousin, who had applied himself so industriously during the last six months to win Fitz Alwyn's favour, that if he did not altogether obtain it for himself, it was, at least, weakened for his rival, of whom the newly made Lord Mayor, now thought as of one whose character was blighted beyond cure: it was this conviction, strengthened by the unaccounted for absence of the young knight, that made Fitz Alwyn, now firmly impress upon his niece, the necessity of yielding to Sir Stephen's claims.

There were, however, among those familiar with the facts of the case, two of very high estate, and two in a very low one, who still held, without faltering, to their first good opinion of Sir Aymer. The first of these were the king, and his son Richard, the others were, the Jew Jacob of Milan, and Peter the Gascon.

Meantime, it wanted but a week, of the great feast

of Christendom, which in those days was held in London, no less holily than merrily. Mummers, and maskers, whole thickets of holly, and mountains of good cheer, were already preparing: but Mabel Verneuil beheld these joyful tokens with a sick heart, and clasping her hands, in the solitude of her chamber, muttered, "But one week, but a week!"

A fall of snow in the beginning of December, had been succeeded by a severe frost, and a whisper having reached Mabel, that Sir Aymer had repaired to Gascony, the weather even increased her distress, for supposing that he had visited France, in search of some clue necessary to make perfect his acquittal, might not the inopportune frost delay his return.

As for Sir Stephen, however merry and self satisfied he sought to appear, he endured at this time an anxiety, which it required hypocrisy as finished as his own to conceal. But if Sir Stephen went abroad with an unruffled brow, and an even temper, while his heart ached, and bitter words were ready to burst from his lip, he took to himself in private, an ample indemnity for the controul upon his feelings which it cost him so much to keep. Sleepless nights, insane fits of fury, of which his dwarf Fabian was most frequently the victim; bitter oaths mingled with the names of his cousin, and others, who had thwarted him, frantic

fears, bursts of despair, and weeping, would, had the veil been lifted, have spoken terribly to the world, the reward of the wicked.

In such a mood as this, was Sir Stephen, a week before the festival of Christmas; ah, could the poor Mabel have seen him, she would at once have dried her own tears, in the conviction that heaven's justice would not fail to foil the last villainy of that bold bad man.

A splendid banquet was that night, held at the royal palace, to which Sir Stephen had been invited, but he had other matters on hand; he had dispatched his dwarf Fabian to the city, to learn if any ship had yet come in: Sir Stephen's heart was heavy for tidings from Gascony, the dispute between himself and Sir Aymer, was not in his mind, already settled to the discomfiture of the latter.

The night was fair for the season, the air clear, the sky sparkling with its garniture of stars, and the earth with its crisp covering of snow.

One solitary lamp alone burned in Sir Stephen's chamber, the cheerful wood fire, he had suffered in spite of the cold, to sink so low upon the hearth, that a few dying, dreary looking embers alone remained. What was cold, or heat to him? who with a heart gnawed by the worm that dieth not, paced that room

with unequal steps, revolving all his own dire treasons against God and man.

A knock was heard at the chamber-door, and with eyes, starting with terror, the conscience-stricken knight sunk into a chair, muttering he knew not what of mingled prayers, and threats.

After a slight pause, the knocking returned, mingled with the voice of Fabian, praying for immediate admittance.

"What news Fabian, what news?" impatiently demanded Sir Stephen, cautiously refastening the door, and sinking into a chair.

The dwarf however stood before him with his hideous face blanched to the whiteness of a corpse, with teeth chattering, and staring eyes, as though he feared to speak the tidings which he brought. His silence served only to irritate his wretched master.

"Speak, speak, thou limb of darkness!" he cried, "hold me not in suspense, or I will send thee to thy fellow fiends before thy time!"

"Master!" gasped the dwarf, "I dare not! at least," he exclaimed, seeing Sir Stephen raise his hand, "promise that you will not hurt me."

"Speak thy news then, and at once!" returned Sir Stephen, again throwing himself into a chair.

"Then master, poor master!" said the dwarf, in a hollow husky tone, as if even his hard heart for

once was touched with pity; "Guy has returned, he says that Sir Aymer has been in Gascony, that his arts made our trouble useless in the summer, and that now that accursed knight is in London, and brings with him," here the dwarf lowered his voice, to the faintest possible whisper, "one that you wot of Sir Stephen!"

"Liar!" cried the infuriated Sir Stephen, fiercely striking the dwarf to the ground, who rose immediately, and regarding his master with a look of malice, drew towards the door.

"I will to the king!" he said, "and tell him all I know, 'tis a right honourable business for a noble knight!"

"And get thee hanged for thine own share in it, thou dull fool!" answered Sir Stephen, but in a tone that showed he feared having exasperated the dwarf too much. "Fabian, my trusty Fabian," he cried, "pardon me that misjudging blow; ill must it fare with him who brings ill news; but tell me again, Fabian, thou didst not say so, my accursed cousin in London, and in his company he whom I dread so much, whom you too, may dread!"

"You waited in your fury for only half my tale!" said Fabian, sullenly, "else my tongue that gave the wound, might also name the remedy!"

"Remedy! good lack, what remedy, what remedy?" ejaculated Sir Stephen, in accents of despair. "Yes, flight Fabian, flight, that may be still our resource, for that, I who am always wise, have taken order! But then, the jeers and mocks, and Aymer the brainless profligate to triumph over me, me! ha, have I not pressed him almost to death, and is the worm to turn on me now with the tooth of the serpent!"

"Patience master, patience!" cried the dwarf, in a low hissing tone, and creeping close to the knight: "Hark you, my master, is not this kinsman of thine still a very brainless fool! he purposes not to stay in this good city of London, where the bows and bills of the citizens, the faithful servitors of my new Lord Mayor, might keep him very safe. No, trusting to his own right valorous arm, and that of his stripling page Eustace, he sets off to-night for his old den at Epping, with his precious charge in company too!"

"How know you this Fabian?" gasped Sir Stephen, the deformity of a dark thought, scaring even him in whose mind it rose.

"From the witnessing of mine own ears!" replied the dwarf; "happily for us the ship Eleanor, and a small craft which Sir Aymer was rich enough, it seems, to engage on his own account, came together into port this very evening, and thereupon the knight and his

companions repaired secretly to the kitchen of Peter the Gascon, and I who was lurking in the dusky way, heard him bid Eustace have horses ready for them to leave London in two hours time, for the forest he said, we may well wot the forest he means."

"But shall we not be too late?" demanded Sir Stephen in a hollow voice.

"Not a whit, master, not a whit!" answered the dwarf, speaking more to the vile purpose which had hitherto been rather understood than declared between him and his employer; "let them get well on their way, master, they were best dealt with in the forest!"

"But the sailor Guy, what of him, Fabian, what of him?" inquired Sir Stephen.

"No more than I have said, my master," replied the dwarf; "he has learned that the meddling Sir Aymer has been the wizard to turn our cream sour from the first. Lo you, it was to mar our stout purposes he turned both lands and jewels into gold!"

"Well! well!" cried Sir Stephen, muttering, "there is yet the means to amend all, to-night, Aymer, to-night!" Then he again addressed the dwarf: "The sailor Guy is bold and strong of hand, will he

not go with us on our journey, we are but two, Fabian, we are but two!"

"No, master!" replied Fabian, "for I tempted him sore, but he refused me with rough words, and when I laughed at his squeamish stomach, I thought he would have brained me with that iron fist of his, and fain I was then to part from his company!"

"May not he then betray us?" cried the miserable knight, turning pale to a new fear.

"He might, were not that also to betray himself!" returned Fabian; "you forget, worthy master, the threat which you made to me, holds good for him!"

"True! true!" replied Sir Stephen. "Go then, my trusty Fabian, and get fleet horses as soon as they may be procured, the ground is hard and promises us swift riding. All things fit our purpose, Fabian," he continued, turning on the dwarf a grisly smile, "the queen has excused me from her board, and the night is fair, and if we are but two, Fabian, the third in their party will not cast the odds!"

"I think not, master!" cried the dwarf, turning to leave the room, with a chuckle that made even Sir Stephen's blood run cold.

No sooner had he gone on his errand to procure the horses, than Sir Stephen, approaching an ancient cabinet, took from it various costly trinkets. "'Tis

not ten minutes' walking," he said, "to the dwelling of the Jew, Jacob, and it were wise to turn these remaining jewels into gold to-night, for if I meet not with Sir Aymer, by to-morrow's dawn I must be far from hence!"

CHAPTER XII.

The worthy little cook, Peter the Gascon, had long since pardoned both Gilbert and the warden, for their uncourteous abandonment of him in the forest of Epping. He was, as before observed, a very strenuous supporter of the much maligned Sir Aymer, in whose behalf he never lost an opportunity of speaking. It was with real grief, too, that this kind-hearted creature had marked the form of Mabel wasting, and her cheek growing paler day by day, as those days melted into weeks, yet brought her no comforting assurance of her lover's truth. Peter was in high good humour, too, with all that concerned Fitz Alwyn, because, on the event of the latter's inauguration, he had been himself chosen to direct the feast furnished on the occasion, and which was held, as it ever since has been, in the great city hall called the Guild Hall, from

the circumstance of all the crafts or guilds of London meeting there: it was not till after this period that the term Company superseded the original religious title of Guild.

It was about an hour after the conversation just detailed, between Sir Stephen and his page, that Peter, abandoning for the time his kitchen, redolent of the fruits and spices preparing for the Christmas fare, betook himself to the dwelling of the Lord Mayor at London Stone.

Though the purpose of his errand was characterized by his accustomed good nature, yet Peter held some demur with himself as he proceeded to execute it, for he had a great notion of abiding by his word, and this word he was certainly about to break. "Yet why?" reasoned he, "should the sweet mistress Mabel bear with even an hour of grief that she may be saved from; it is well for the knight with his fine notions of honour, to say that till his name stand fair with the world he must send no word or token even to his own true love, though her poor heart break! The Virgin defend us, I like not the honour which breaks hearts, not I: so fair mistress Mabel shall have a good posset to sleep sound on to-night, in the news that Sir Aymer is come home safe and well, and ready to claim her on the feast of Yule. I like not his set-

ting out for Epping to-night though; there was another fancy of his honour, forsooth well, my honour shall consist in giving mistress Mabel a quiet night, at the cost of my word to Sir Aymer, a sin for which I shall make but a short shrift, and reckon on a light penance!"

So earnest was the cook in these cogitations, that arriving at the dwelling of the Mayor, he ran against, and almost over-balanced, another person who reached the door at the same moment.

"Oh the evil lot of my people!" ejaculated this last person in a fretful tone, "cannot the Jew seek even to do a good turn to the Gentile, but he must be knocked down on the road!"

At this moment the door opened, and the Mayor himself appeared, attended by two lacqueys bearing torches: he was wrapped in a furred hood and mantle, as though he were about to proceed abroad.

"Good, my lord!" exclaimed Jacob of Milan, eagerly thrusting himself before Peter, "if it be not on a matter of life and death that you are leaving your house, return but to give me a word!"

"What, my testy grumbling friend, Jacob," exclaimed the Mayor, "what makes you here in this nipping north wind of ours: in sooth, no matter

calls me abroad that I may not stay to learn thine errand!"

"The God of Israel be praised!" cried the Jew, "that I am in time to see you, master Mayor;" then drawing closer to Fitz Alwyn, he whispered, "some mischief, I fear me, is brewing under the hand of Sir Stephen!"

These words, low as was the tone in which they were uttered, did not escape the quick ear of Peter the Gascon, who, springing forwards, exclaimed in an eager voice, "Oh my Worshipful Lord Mayor, good master Israelite, admit me, I pray you, of your counsel, if it be of the kinsmen Montalt that ye have to speak!"

The earnest manner of both his visitants was such, that Fitz Alwyn, relinquishing his intention of proceeding abroad, at once led the way to his sitting apartment.

"Now tell me first, each of you!" he said, when they were seated, "in as few words as may be, what news you bring!"

"I, my lord, have seen Sir Aymer!" said Peter, "who boasts that at the Yule feast he will claim mistress Mabel's hand; in sooth, I promised the knight to conceal his arrival, the more that he has already set out for Epping, but I weened that the news of his

coming, would so brighten the looks of fair mistress Mabel, that I would risk Sir Aymer's anger at my broken faith!"

"Ah then!" cried the Jew, impatiently interrupting Peter; "If Sir Aymer be in London, then my fear had in it a justice. Oh my Lord Mayor, summon at once some half dozen of your stout city youths, and take horse for Epping, so may you prevent foul murder being done!"

"Murder!" ejaculated the Mayor, his florid cheek turning pale. "I pray you Jacob what awful fantasy is this?"

"Hark you, my Lord Mayor!" said Jacob, "you know well, that despite all the untoward matters that have pressed against him, I have never given up my belief in the fair faith of Sir Aymer. The poor youth, hunted down and ruined by that Midianite, his cousin. But lo you, since the young knight quitted the court, Sir Stephen comes to me often, pledging jewels for sums of gold, I do own it seemed to me but such honest craft as the fathers of my race have used, to press him with sore questions of his cousin, and verily I found that the name of that youth was bitter to him as hyssop; he feared Sir Aymer's journey, and feared more for his return. But what was I to think when not an hour since, he leaves the fair banquet of

the queen, and comes to my dwelling with white face, and shaking limbs, praying that on the instant I will hand him more gold, upon certain gems that he brought with him; spurred and mantled too he was, as for a journey, and deeming from his wild looks, and random answers, that there was some mischief lurking in his brain, I set my serving man, Issachar, to watch him in his departure, when mark you, he was met at the top of the Chepe by his dwarf Fabian, with two stout horses which they mounted, and rode off at a rate as though their own lives were on their speed! Then as I knew the time drew near that was to decide the doom of his cousin, I bethought me, that had much to do with the knight's journey, of which it were well that your lordship should wot; and if it be as this worthy man tells us, that Sir Aymer is on the road to Epping, most surely then his cousin is on his track!"

These apprehensions of the Jew, wore indeed so serious an aspect in the eyes of Fitz Alwyn, especially when coupled with the news of Sir Aymer brought by the cook, that after warning the latter to breathe no word to Mabel of the knight's return, which with the other circumstances, seemed more likely to increase her distress of mind than relieve it, he determined to

follow the counsel of Jacob of Milan, and thereupon summoning the youth, Gilbert, and six stout men of the city, in less than half an hour the worthy Mayor took with them the road to Epping.

CHAPTER XIII.

The night when the Lord Mayor and his little party set out, was clear and frosty, their good steeds went over the ground at a gallant rate; and they were not, at first, without a hope to overtake Sir Aymer ere he reached Epping: but this expectation was dispelled, when on arriving at Stratford, they found that two persons answering to the description of the knight and his page, Eustace, had passed through that town an hour before; they were, however, unable to glean any tidings of Fabian and Sir Stephen; still it was held advisable by the Mayor and Gilbert, to press forwards, as those two last ill disposed persons might really have passed through Stratford without exciting any notice on the part of the inhabitants, or in order even to escape observation, have avoided the town by taking some bye way.

Meanwhile, another hour's sharp riding brought the Mayor and his attendants some way into the forest. The moon was up, but in case of any mishap, from a change in the weather, the companions of Fitz Alwyn were provided with torches and lanthorns, to guide them, if necessary, on their way. The forest as they now entered it, presented a strange and ghastly appearance, the huge arms of the trees, being laden with a crust of frozen snow, while their trunks loomed darkly in the uncertain and partial light, and the eyes, where the moonbeams fell, ached with the glittering reflection of the snow that completely covered the ground. It was the intention of Fitz Alwyn to proceed direct to that spot so often mentioned as the limit of Sir Aymer's mysterious visits to the forest, and which was now so well known to Gilbert, that he made no scruple of undertaking to conduct the Mayor thither. An unpleasant change, however, seemed now likely to take place in the weather, dark clouds rolled over the moon, the wind began to rush wildly among the trees, scattering at every blast a sparkling shower of the snow with which they were laden, while the soft wet flakes, that were dashed in the faces of the party, when they rode across the more open glades, betokened that a fresh fall had commenced.

To be surprised by a snow-storm in the forest, was a contingency for which the Mayor had not calculated, and he was at a loss, whether to proceed, to turn back, or collecting his little party under the covert of some of the huge trees, set them to kindle a large fire, and solace themselves with their mantles, and the good liquor, of which, on account of the coldness of the night alone, he had ordered a keg to be slung at the saddle bow of the first of his attendants. The snow was now descending in such a thick and blinding shower, as made it necessary for the time, at any rate, to pursue the last expedient. The fire, too, would keep aloof such beasts of the forest, as pressed by cold and hunger, might otherwise molest them. The party therefore, having kindled their torches, the men set, with all possible speed, about collecting dry sticks among the underwood, of which they had soon a heap sufficient. While their attendants were yet occupied in kindling this fire, the Mayor and Gilbert started simultaneously, as the sound of a long wild shriek passed along the wind. The man who had just lighted the dry chips, dropped his torch, exclaiming that thieves or wild beasts must have attacked some person in the forest.

"Patience, good Wilfrid!" replied the Mayor, "we can scarce tell one sound from another, in this howl-

ing wind, it might be, perhaps, only the cry of some animal!"

Listening attentively, however, during the next pause of the gust, they distinctly heard the shriek renewed, pealing at first, loud and shrill, and then dying away in a low wail, that seemed to intimate the sufferer in the last extremity of pain. There could be now no doubt that the voice was a human one: and hastily bidding three of the men attend to the fire and the horses, the Mayor with Gilbert, and the other three, set off in the direction whence the sounds seemed to proceed.

"'Tis down this avenue, the cry comes, my lord!" said Gilbert, "and if I mistake not, we are near the glen, which Sir Aymer used to visit; it is there too doubtless that Sir Stephen would seek him!"

Another wild, sharp shriek filled the air as the youth spoke; but it paused suddenly, and nothing was heard save the light rustling of the snow as it fell. The Mayor and his attendants sped forward with a faster step. How had that wild voice been stopped so suddenly? One of the men, breathless with running, flagged, and held the torch which he bore, somewhat lower than those of his companions.

"Oh, Holy Virgin!" ejaculated Gilbert, in an accent of horror; "look, look my lord, there is blood upon the snow!"

Blood, indeed, had fallen there, and so newly spilt, that it was not yet concealed by the fast descending snow flakes. The track, upon examination, appeared to lead from the avenue, in which were the Mayor and his companions, to a neighbouring coppice of dwarf oaks. But while Fitz Alwyn hesitated whether to venture with his companions into this thicket, where they might be exposed to, he knew not what number of assailants, the branches were thrust aside, and the page Eustace, with his face pale, his garments torn and covered with blood, staggered towards them; he had just strength to murmur out the names of his master, and Sir Stephen, and point to the thicket, when he fell swooning at the feet of the Mayor.

Committing the wounded page to the charge of one of his men, Fitz Alwyn, with the other two, made his way into the copse. Here there appeared the traces of a hideous conflict, the underwood torn, and the snow ground up, and mixed with clotted blood. On one side of the thicket, the ground ascended somewhat steeply in a kind of bank, and here long streaks of blood were visible, as if some person grievously wounded, had been dragged by main force up the ascent, on mounting which, Gilbert and Fitz Alwyn found that it overlooked a stream now frozen; while among the brushwood that overhung its banks,

the track of blood disappeared. From their scrutiny of this spot however, the Mayor and his companion were quickly called by a loud shout from the men, whom they had left in the copse below, and hastening thither, they assisted them to drag from his hiding-place among the underwood, the dwarf Fabian. Of the share which this wretch had borne in the deeds of the night there could be no doubt; his hideous aspect was white, and distorted with rage and fear, his hands were dabbled with blood, and blood and snow stained his garments. To increase, however, if possible, the horror of Fitz Alwyn and his companions; from under the same bushes beneath which they had discovered Fabian, they now drew forth the yet warm body of a beautiful boy, of about four years of age, upon whose fair throat appeared the blue marks of strangulation.

On being accused of the murder of this child, the dwarf, with many shrieks and cries, protested that the deed was Sir Stephen's.

CHAPTER XIV.

With thoughts bent upon no less horrible a crime than murder, the miserable Sir Stephen had indeed pursued his cousin to the forest of Epping.

The party of Sir Aymer, consisted of himself, his page, and that unfortunate child whose murdered remains were discovered in the forest, by the Mayor of London and his attendants. A perhaps too eager anxiety to relieve the heart of the mother of his little charge, had induced Sir Aymer to bear him to her abode immediately on his arrival in London.

In perfect safety, and congratulating himself on the fairness of the night, he arrived with his companions at that avenue in the forest, where Gilbert had first noticed the track of blood; when Eustace and he, heard the hoofs of other horses than their own, rapidly approaching, and ere he was aware, an assailant was at his side, and a sharp wound in his right arm compelled

him to let go the reins of his horse; in the next moment, they were seized by the dwarf Fabian, who joining his efforts to those of his master, dragged the unfortunate knight from his horse, who still however with his left arm, kept fast hold of the child, who had been seated before him on the pummel of his saddle.

Eustace on his part, was not slow to come to the assistance of his master, and a dagger stroke which he gave the dwarf, compelling him to relinquish his part of the attack upon Sir Aymer, gave the latter time to struggle to his feet, and committing the boy to Eustace, defend himself from his murderous kinsman, who having now cast away the javelin or boar-spear with which he had first attacked him, was pressing him hard with the sword. The horses of both parties fled at random through the forest.

"Oh fool!" cried Sir Stephen, gnashing his teeth, "was it for the forfeit of thine own life, thou didst yield fame and fortune, to save that of the boy?"

"Murderer, as well as liar and thief!" answered Sir Aymer, sharply defending himself, "heaven has not yet set my life at thy mercy!"

Meantime, the piercing shrieks of the poor child, whom Eustace, in obedience to his master's commands, endeavoured to bear away, added to the terror of the scene: but a stroke in the back from the dwarf's dag-

ger, stretched the faithful page senseless in the copse, where Fabian himself was afterwards found concealed; into this copse also, Sir Aymer was gradually driven at the point of his cousin's sword, and here the horrible dwarf coming to the assistance of his master, the unfortunate Sir Aymer was at length stretched cruelly wounded by the side of his page.

Believing both his cousin and Eustace to be dead, the next thought of Sir Stephen, was to conceal their bodies, and by his orders Fabian first dragged that of Sir Aymer up the ascent noticed by Gilbert and the Mayor, and precipitated it into the frozen stream below.

Meanwhile, the snow storm had commenced, the howling wind bore a thousand horrible voices to the ears of Sir Stephen; the cold snow flakes that beat in his face, were not colder than the blood that curdled round his heart. He was alone too, with the boy, that innocent unfortunate who had been the cause of all this horror; his piteous cries awakened only in the heart of Sir Stephen, a fear lest they should attract some wayfarer to the spot, and with a bitter execration he struck the hapless infant to the ground. Perhaps Sir Stephen knew not himself how his grasp tightened on the child's throat, but strangely mixed with the howling blast, wild voices seemed to jabber in his

ears, wilder eyes seemed glaring through the branches, and the snow that still kept falling, and spread on all sides round him, seemed to his wandering fancy, like a huge winding sheet, spotted with dark stains of blood.

"Ha, ha! you have done it bravely now, sir knight!" cried a hideous chuckling voice, not like those which seemed to bid him to the deed, and looking up, as if awaking from some horrid dream, Sir Stephen beheld the dwarf standing beside him, with a torch which he had kindled, the flame of which swayed in the night wind over the distorted features of the murdered child.

"But hark, hark! sir knight!" cried the dwarf again, shaking his master, who turned with a stupid unconscious air from him, to the body of the child: "I hear footsteps on the dull snow, and voices on the wind, and yonder is the light of a torch upon the trees! fly, my master, fly, or we are lost!"

Terror had given acuteness to the dwarf's senses, for Fitz Alwyn and his companions had only just entered the avenue, at the end of which was the fatal thicket, but the miserable Sir Stephen, roused at length by the words that seemed to announce detection in his crime, uttering himself that short, wild cry which had last struck the ears of the Mayor and

Gilbert, fled through the dense forest way, as though a legion of avenging fiends were already at his heels. As for Fabian, when he beheld the page, whom he had thought slain, slowly rise, and, turning a pair of glassy eyes upon him, stagger towards the entrance of the thicket; hearing the pursuers still approach, he had not thought or strength to attempt a flight, but cowering down among the bushes, vainly hoping to find concealment there, he drew with him the corpse of the unfortunate child.

Meanwhile, the wretched Sir Stephen still fled onwards, onwards; his mantle had fallen from his shoulders, his hair streamed loose in the wind, sometimes he sunk knee deep in the snow, at others the low-hanging branches of the trees dashed him rudely in the face, but still that forlorn one sped onwards, wounded, bruised, breathless.

How much will not the poor body bear, when borne up by the stronger torture of the mind! how else had Sir Stephen lived through that night spent in the desolate wilds? He knew not in the morning how he had found his way to the rude refuge of the hollow oak, where a fawn had sheltered her young ones, whose warmth had doubtless alone preserved his life. But the dreams that had there oppressed him were not forgotten.

The faces of the newly slain, the faces of the long dead, were in those dreams, their voices in the winds that whistled round him; there was his cousin, as he remembered him in the sweet days of childhood, ere yet a rancorous envy seared his heart, and another was by Aymer's side, whose looks were even like those of the child whom he had slain, and slowly that form appeared to change till it took the stature and features of a stalwart knight: who looked sternly into the eyes of Sir Stephen, while the oak coppice swam before him, with that awful vision of the knight pointing to the dead child. With a cry of horror the murderer awoke, the grey winter morning was breaking in the East, the snow had ceased to fall, but the wind still shrieked wildly through the forest, the giant oaks even cracking and bending in the blast. An awful obscurity still veiled the scene, the huge trunks of the nearest trees rising darkly from the waste of snow, while amid the shadows that hovered in the distance, it required not the guilty and diseased fancy of Sir Stephen to shape out dismal and threatening forms.

Meanwhile, that love of life which clings, perhaps, the most strongly to the most depraved of the human race, now urged Sir Stephen upon thoughts of good *and securer* shelter. With the darkness of the night

much of his superstitious fear was dispelled, and he even endeavoured to set for himself miserable excuses for the foul deeds which he had committed, laying to his soul that last unction of the wicked and the selfish, that at least if the course he had pursued had failed, it was the wisest that he could have followed to secure his own aggrandisement. Meanwhile, the numbing cold, and the pain of his wounds and bruises, made him feel that if death threatened him in the haunts of men, it was no less certain in the snow-covered forest. He was vaguely conscious that he must have fled to a considerable distance from the scene of the murder, and perceiving that there were no traces of his foot-marks near the hollow oak, he hugged himself with the thought that if the snow which had fallen after he had taken shelter in the tree, had there hidden his track, it had of course equally concealed it in all other parts of the forest.

Before leaving his covert, Sir Stephen felt for the gold which he had received from the Jew, Jacob of Milan, on the preceding night, and which, in the remote apprehension of some hap as severe as the present, he had, with as much more as he could conveniently carry, concealed about his person. A furtive smile even played over the face of the miserable wretch, as he found that poor portion of the accursed dross

for which he had bartered his soul, was safe. With pain and difficulty he now rose, there was but little chance that the courtly Sir Stephen de Montalt would be recognized in the deplorable object which he was conscious that he now appeared. His rich garments were torn and blood-stained, his very shoes rent from his feet by the briars through which he had forced his way, while his face was covered with scratches, and his whole person a mass of bruises and wounds.

Meantime, his eye fell upon the young fawns, the innocent companions of his night's shelter, and his hand upon his only weapon, the dagger that hung at his girdle. But he withdrew it with a shudder, he whose sword had slain his near kinsman, whose hand had griped to strangulation the throat of a young child, now feared to look upon the blood of a fawn.

Sick, and shivering, he at last crept from his hiding place, and to his joy he found at no great distance the hut of a swineherd. To this simple and secluded creature, who possessed neither wife nor child, and who scarcely ever had been beyond the bounds of the forest, Sir Stephen's tale of having been benighted in the storm, sufficiently accounted for his forlorn appearance. With that true kindness and hospitality some-

times to be found among the extreme poor, he brought warm water to bathe the knight's wounds, set before him an ample repast of bacon, barley bread, and goat's milk, and pressed him when it was concluded to rest upon his own couch of dried leaves and moss.

The snow storm returning while the knight slept, and continuing during the whole of that and part of the succeeding day, made it impossible for him to quit the hut of the friendly swineherd; a delay under which he was much consoled by the reflection that its cause would make it as impossible for the officers of justice to penetrate into the recesses of the forest, as it was for him to leave them. Meantime, with the assistance of the friendly swineherd, he repaired his garments, and continued to recover from his wounds.

Anxious and terrible moments still had the wretched Sir Stephen; while his poor host slept the quiet sleep of innocence and toil, a thousand hideous fancies chased each other through his brain. What if his dwarf Fabian had been taken, would he not tell all, and so strict a search for himself be then set on foot, that it would make it all but death to leave the woods: and supposing that he made good his escape not only from the forest but from England itself, how then was he, used to all the luxuries and observance

claimed by great wealth, to bear with the sting of that poverty which he had been so eager to impose upon his cousin: for the gold which he had secured was but a very small portion of the fruits of his guilt, and to his avarice it appeared even less. Neither was he yet free from the pursuit of those horrors which had oppressed him almost to madness on the night of the murder. No sooner did the shades of evening descend upon the hut, than a thousand frightful spectres peopled the darkness, the pale forms of his victims, the hideous aspects of the demons who had first urged him to the deed, yet who now assumed the task of avenging it.

Had the wretched Sir Stephen possessed the power of discriminating as to the best method of securing his personal safety, he had certainly kept himself for some weeks fast concealed in the swineherd's cottage: but the curse of Cain was on his soul, there was no abiding place for the murderer's foot; an awful restlessness fastened on him, and when the evening of the second day set in fair and frosty, he felt as though he must quit the cabin, or die.

For a few pieces of silver, he had purchased of the swineherd a large mantle made of goatskins, and sheltered by that from the piercing cold, and armed with a stout stick in addition to his dagger, he took

his way through the forest. The night was clear and the moon shining on the brittle snows, made earth and trees seem as though they were alike spread with a sparkling robe of silver. A cheeriness of spirit, such as he had not known since the commission of his crime, and for which he was himself at a loss to account, filled the frame of Sir Stephen, and he passed on with a brisk step, in such a direction as he could calculate by the stars, would lead him on the road towards the seaport of Harwich, where he intended to engage some small vessel to convey him to France. A strange exultation animated the knight, his heart beat high, the mocking blood-stained spectres seemed no more to pursue him; assuredly this was but the lull before the storm, the deceitful calm that preceded the flaming bolt of heaven's eternal wrath.

Under the impulse of this rash confidence, having emerged from the forest, Sir Stephen, fearlessly took the way towards the town of Chipping Ongar, the first, he was informed by a peasant, that crossed his road.

Nothing could be lovelier than that winter scene, the pale moon and the countless stars, the earth sparkling as though it were sprinkled with diamonds, and the clustering hollies now gorgeous with their scarlet berries. As Sir Stephen approached the out-

skirts of the village, a sound of solemn voices filled the air, and lights, moving in the distance, made him aware that the priest of the district, was, according to the use of those days, proceeding through it, with his choristers, chanting the carols of Christmas.

As those holy and sweet sounds still swelled louder on the air, as the singers drew nearer to the guilty knight, they seemed to have in them a power to destroy all that audacity of confidence, in which he had lately been so bold. The sounds of thanksgiving and joy, what echo could they find in the heart of the murderer? what memory could he have of heaven, save of its justice, and its wrath? Cowering, desponding, the miserable wretch shrunk into the copse that bordered the road-side, as the procession approached, and looked trembling from between the boughs, as though he feared that the very wind, tainted by his presence, would whisper of it to the pious throng as they passed. A convulsive shudder shook his frame, as he perceived that the procession was led by a company of young children, clothed in white, and bearing holly branches in their hands: then came the Cross, and incense bearers, followed by the choristers, walking two and two, and carrying waxen tapers, and finally the village priest, an aged man of venerable aspect. As this *procession* slowly wound along the road, the words of

their song, awoke, only in the heart of the knight, yet more maddening emotions of anguish and despair, and clasping his hands over his ears he sunk back, and with difficulty restrained the groans which were his response to the Christian's song of hope and joy.

I.

Soul! that to earth and its folly clings,
Rise thou to-night with the holy kings,
Their guiding star on the sky is set
And the virgins wise to their watch are met;
To Bethlem a more precious thing,
Than frankincense or myrrh they bring,
Incense, sweet Lord, of the hearts that love
Thy name, and thy precepts all else above!

II.

Oh Star of the East! for that endless day!
Whose glory might darken thy brightest ray!
Oh for the time when the hands that now
Bear, but to hail thee, the holly bough,
Shall weave the garlands that never die,
In the land that knows not a tear, or sigh!
Then hail thee, Star! that a hope first gave
Of that blessed region beyond the grave!

And the region beyond the grave, what was its hope for the guilty Sir Stephen, all things of peace and love were at discord with his soul, and seemed but to

write its crimes in characters of fire. Pale, trembling, conscious stricken, he stole out of the thicket, but not till the tapers borne by the pious singers, were twinkling among the trees at a distance. In his freshly awakened terrors, Sir Stephen now crept stealthily along, avoiding, as much as possible, the moonlight spaces of the road: suddenly he heard the sound of horses' hoofs, sharply clattering towards him, thereupon he was seized with a wild terror, as if the riders could be no others than the officers charged with his apprehension, and hastily endeavouring to scramble up a steep bank to escape passing them on the road, his foot slipped, and he fell backwards with a violence that for a few minutes stunned him. On recovering, Sir Stephen, found himself supported by two persons attired in the military garb of the time, the third, who stood a little apart, seemed as though he held command over the others. On perceiving Sir Stephen raise himself from the arms of his supporters, this person stepped forwards, and placing his hand upon the knight's shoulder, exclaimed in a stern voice:

"I arrest thee, Sir Stephen de Montalt, in the name of our sovereign lord the king!"

"Alas!" exclaimed the miserable knight, as if

anxious to learn what extent of his guilt was known, "of what crime am I accused?"

"That it belongs not altogether to my office to make known to thee!" replied the soldier, "yet in christian charity, I may say, make thy peace Sir Stephen with heaven, for on earth thou hast no hope, arrested as thou art, under the foul charge of murdering the heir of thy brother, the late Gaston de Montalt."

CHAPTER XV.

An anxiety of a deep and terrible nature, but little in unison with the holy and joyful season, was exhibited on the countenances of those citizens of London, who had been by especial favour, permitted an entrance to the palace hall of Westminster, during a solemn investigation, which, four days before Christmas, was held there, in the king's own presence.

At an early hour, the lord mayor, Fitz Alwyn, attired in rich robes of office, of scarlet cloth trimmed with fur, set out for Westminster, preceded by his sword and mace bearers, and attended by twenty-four stout citizens in liveries of scarlet. As it was understood that it was not merely by virtue of his office, but as a witness also, that the lord mayor was to be present, the matter excited an extraordinary interest in the city, and the principal members of the

various guilds obtained permission to be present, including of course, that of the drapers, to which Fitz Alwyn himself belonged.

Nothing would be more impressive than the scene presented in the old hall when the various actors were assembled. As it was expected that the investigations would be prolonged beyond the brief period of daylight, at that wintry season, and the meeting could not be commenced till noon, huge waxen tapers were placed in sconces on either side of the hall, and massy bronze lamps, containing each twelve burners, were suspended from its groined roof. At the upper end of the hall, was raised a magnificent throne, for the king and queen, whom report said would also be present; above this throne was a richly wrought canopy of purple silk, and a foot cloth of purple also covered the platform below, where a step beneath the throne were placed chairs of state, for the two princes, Richard and John. Benches for the accommodation of the various dignitaries of the city and the court, were placed immediately below the platform, and below these again were seats for the inferior class of spectators.

Immediately in front of the platform, stretched a long oaken table, covered with crimson cloth, and before this was placed a bier bearing a dumb but

awful witness in the coming proceedings, in the shrouded body of a young child.

The citizens with their mayor at their head, the archbishops of York and Canterbury, with their train, the chancellor of England, and the chamberlain of the royal household, were at their posts, by the hour of noon: many fair dames of the court and city, were among the spectators, and shortly afterwards a flourish of trumpets announced the arrival of the king and queen, who, as soon as they had taken their seats, gave the signal for the proceedings to commence.

Mabel Verneuil and her friend Rose, were honoured with seats near to the queen. A slight murmur was heard, and presently Sir Stephen de Montalt, the late favourite officer of the queen's household, was brought in. During the four and twenty hours that had elapsed since he was taken prisoner, Sir Stephen had recovered much of his audacity, and being able to glean nothing respecting his cousin, and the page, while he found that Fabian only, witnessed against him, as to the murder of the child, he determined boldly to brave his horrible position, impose the burden of the crime upon the shoulders of the dwarf, and die, if die he must, protesting his own innocence. Thus prepared, he listened with an unmoved air to the reading of his indictment, in the first count of

which he was charged with having two years before, upon the death of his brother, the late Sir Gaston de Montalt, a knight of Guienne, and England, wrongfully seized and imprisoned the persons of the Lady Corraly the widow, and Godfrey, the infant son of his late brother. That he had immured them in the dungeons of a castle, in Gascony, which was of the lady's own inheritance, but which, with her other castles and lands, as she had no near kin, had been willed to fall to the relations of her husband, in the failure of their own immediate descendants. The indictment then went on to state, that the Lady Corraly, after a time, found means to escape from the hands of her brother-in-law, by the assistance of his own near kinsman, Sir Aymer; but that fearing for the safety of her child, whom she had been compelled to leave for a time in the power of his uncle, she had lived in England in profound concealment, and suffered Sir Stephen to spread uncontradicted, a report of her own, and of her infant's death, and to take possession of her estates: trusting to the address of Sir Aymer, yet to rescue the child, whose life she hoped to secure by her silence. It appeared too, that the unfortunate lady had suffered much, in consequence of her lineage, and imperfect knowledge of the languages, both of France and England; her mother having been a Sara-

cen lady, of great beauty, captured by her father, a nobleman of Gascony, while engaged in the Crusades, and though it seemed that this lady became a Christian, and the wife of her captor, yet she had so constantly spoken her native Arabic with her daughter, that it was with difficulty, that Corraly could express herself in any other language. It now appeared too, that much of the money supposed to have been squandered by Sir Aymer de Montalt, on his own expenditure, had really been employed by him in behalf of this unfortunate widow, whose son he had at last managed to rescue also from Sir Stephen, and had brought with him to England three days before the present trial. The document, as read to the court, further consisted of the evidence of the dwarf, Fabian, who had been in his master's confidence from the first, but who now unveiled all his fearful secrets, concluding with a full account of the attack upon Sir Aymer in the forest, and the murder of the child.

"'Tis false!" exclaimed Sir Stephen, in a furious accent, when the charge against him was thus far brought to a close; "is the life of a noble knight to be held at the breath of a false servant? Send to Gascony, and learn there if the lady Corraly and her child were not duly buried!"

"*Cease*, thou miserable man!" said the king,

sternly, "we have in our hand a document attested with the seals of the abbot of that monastery of St. Mary, in the vaults of which thou didst pretend to bury the remains of the Lady Corraly and her son; the coffins have been opened, as this parchment attests, and found to contain only earth and stones!"

"But if Corraly and her son died not at the time supposed!" cried Sir Stephen, catching even at a straw to avert his fate, "that proves not that I slew them since!"

"Oh thou vain man!" answered the king, "these flimsy evasions of thy guilt can avail thee nothing, nor had we ourselves sat in judgment on thee, but that we felt, that great even as thy crimes, should be their punishment; in the face of the world didst thou falsely slander the fair fame of thy cousin, who endured for the time to be thy victim, rather than break his faith with the Lady Corraly, whom thou hadst yet more deeply wronged, and in the face of the world shall his innocence be made known. But think not that it is on the word of the dwarf alone, a creature as wicked as thyself, that thou art to be condemned; my lord the mayor, Fitz Alwyn, whom heaven's just decree, no less than his own courage and prudence, sent to the forest of Epping, on the night thou didst

slay thy nephew, has witnesses to produce against thee, which thou dost but little desire to see!"

A door to the left of the royal seat was then thrown open, and Sir Aymer de Montalt, with a mortal paleness on his face from his yet scarce closed wounds, was borne in on a bier or couch, by the side of which was supported the page, Eustace, whose hurts being less severe than those of his master, was able to walk with some slight assistance.

"Now then, what say'st thou, thou stain to our court, thou most false and craven knight!" demanded Henry. "The all-ruling mercy of God it was, and not a blind chance, which led thy murderous assistant to hurl the senseless Sir Aymer over the edge of the stream, where the bushes broke his fall, and where he was found by the Lady Corraly, past whose subterranean retreat the waters glide! and to whose abode my lord the mayor was directed by the wounded page! Now then, if thy audacity will carry thee yet so far, swear that thou art innocent of thy nephew's death!"

"I slew him not!" doggedly persisted Sir Stephen.

"The law will have thy life!" replied Henry, "whether it pleasure thee to blacken thy doom in another world by dying with this lie upon thy lip or

not! But thou shalt be confronted with thy villain page!"

The countenance of Sir Stephen, when his dwarf was produced, and repeated the evidence which had been before given in writing, became absolutely black with rage and hatred, yet he again renewed his oaths that he had not slain his nephew, in terms that filled with terror the hearts of those who heard them; Sir Aymer, raising himself on his elbow, faintly implored his cousin to cease those horrid adjurations, but the king, though little hoping that a test which shook a common criminal, would avail with one so hardened, bid the attendants uncover the face of the dead child, and then commanded Sir Stephen to approach, and laying his hand upon the cold breast, again swear that he had no share in its untimely death.

With lips quivering, but with a steady step, the audacious criminal drew near to the corpse, and with his hand upon its bosom was about to repeat the proposed oath, when the dwarf, Fabian, loudly implored permission to approach his late master to say a word. The chancellor and the archbishop of Canterbury would have prevented this, but the king said, "Nay, my lords, the evil counsellings of these villains are at an end, though Sir Stephen ten times blacken his soul with perjury, it can scarce avail to save him from

the hangman's hands. Let the dwarf have speech with him!"

"Let me but once more kiss thine hand, my master!" cried the dwarf, kneeling before Sir Stephen, "and craving thy grace for the ill hap which has made me thy accuser, thank thee for all thy favours past!"

"Base hound! dost thou mock the master thou hast betrayed?" cried Sir Stephen, furiously striking at the dwarf, who, warding off the blow with his hand, rose with a smile upon his lips, and drew back a step or two with his guards. Then, as Sir Stephen again pressed the bosom of the dead child, a stream of blood was seen to trickle down its white shroud: and a cry of horror arose, that the ordeal of touch had prevailed, that the corpse quickened and bled beneath the murderer's hand. Still, however, as if himself unaffected by this ghastly omen, Sir Stephen stood heavily leaning on the body of his nephew, his limbs growing rigid, his eyes fixed on vacancy, and specks of foam gathering on his parted lips. It was not till the officers of the court had used some force, that they could move his hand from the corpse, and then as he fell in horrible convulsions at their feet, they discovered that it was from a vein in the knight's own wrist, that the blood had flowed. They endeavoured

to raise and bear him towards the foot of the throne, but then there came another fierce struggle, a frightful shriek, and Sir Stephen lay extended a blackened hideous corpse.

"Ho! ho! my liege the king, my reverend lords and worshipful good masters!" cried the dwarf, gazing round him with the chuckling delight of a gratified fiend. "Have I not paid well my duty to the gracious knight, who despite occasional harsh dealing, gave the poor dwarf shelter which none other would bestow. Have I not saved him from such tender mercies, as reversing his shield, and hacking off his knightly spurs, and gracing him with a collar at the hangman's hand. Judge ye my lords, was not this a right dainty and delicate weapon, to save at once my master and myself!"

As he uttered the last words, the dwarf held up a small lancet, such as is used in letting blood, and ere a hand could be raised to stay his purpose, he had inflicted with it a small puncture in his throat, and so potent was the poison in which it had been steeped, that he at once fell in the agonies of death beside the body of his master.

CHAPTER XVI.

But little wail could there be, for this timeless fate of Sir Stephen de Montalt; it was indeed said, that in his last act, the dwarf had done some service to the world, in ridding it at once of two such pernicious villains as himself, and his master, and the more so, that a public punishment of the latter, must as his near kinsman, have been in some sort painful to Sir Aymer de Montalt. It need hardly be said, that the young knight found but little trouble to appease all the jealous cares of the fair Mabel: or that he was alike heartily congratulated by the draper Gilbert, Peter the Gascon, and Jacob the Jew. As for the latter, Sir Aymer repaid him nobly for the advances made to him in his distress, for by the death of the wretched Sir Stephen, the young knight not only became repossessed of his own lands, but inherited all

those, for the possession of which his miserable cousin had plunged into such inexpiable guilt: for the Lady Corraly, quite broken in heart and spirit by the murder of her son, bestowed her lands and castles in France, upon Sir Aymer, and repaired on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where she died.

As for Peter the Gascon, he was promoted to the high dignity of chief cook in the king's household, a post which he was fond of boasting, was obtained through the exceeding cunning of the dishes and suttelties, which he devised for the great banquet, which the citizens of London gave in their Guild Hall, on the feast of Yule, and which the king, the queen, and the princes, honoured with their presence. But of all these suttelties, the chief was in the centre of the royal table, representing a great forest with its harts, and hinds, reposing beneath the trees, and a fair stream, with wild fowl on its waters, all cunningly devised in coloured sugar: and below this stream appeared a cavern, fairly furnished like a lady's summer parlour, and within it the figures of two gentle dames, surely meant for the Lady Corraly and Mabel. Nor was there lacking a bountiful cheer to back these quaint devices, meant most to please the eye, not only did the huge tables groan under the weight of the princely sirloin, and the noble haunch, and deli-

cate dishes of fowl, wild and tame, but there also were the rarer dainties of the time, the flesh of the dolphin stewed and fried, and the peacock, with the sponge filled with lighted spirits in his mouth, and his gorgeous tail bespread: while of costly wines there was profusion. Nor were the appointments of the table, or the hall in which the feast was held, inferior to itself. Delicate napery from Flanders, covered the board, and the vessels were silver and gold; while in honour, no less of the feast of Yule, than of the Blessed Virgin, the Patroness of the Draper's Guild, to which belonged the lord mayor, the walls were hung with new and splendid tapestry, representing various portions of her history, while her statue, superbly wrought in silver, was placed at the head of the hall, and in her name was dispensed the plentiful dole of bread and beef, which the worshipful drapers that day awarded to the poor.

Proud men indeed were the drapers on that day, when arrayed in their new liveries, of violet, ingrayne and crimson, they took their seats at the table nearest to the royal board; with Gilbert and his new made bride, the blushing Rose, at their head.

At the royal table, beside the king and his family, sat the lord mayor, the archbishop of Canterbury, and some of the chief lords of the court, beside the good

knight Sir Aymer de Montalt, yet pale from his recent wounds, which only, however, a fine constitution had enabled him so soon to recover: at his right hand sat a beautiful damsel arrayed in white embroidered with silver, and wearing rich pearls, purchased from Jacob of Milan, on her bosom and in her hair: need it be said that this was Mabel Verneuil, the bride of Sir Aymer. But now there arose a livelier strain from the gallery, hung with purple and gold, and decorated with huge branches of holly, where were the minstrels; and the king's own jester came dancing and jingling his silver bells before Peter the Gascon, who brought in the famed boar's head, with a troop of mummers at his heels, quaintly arrayed like savage men, with garlands of holly and mistletoe on their heads, and clubs in their hands, and who danced merrily while the following change upon the customary song was sung.

Caput Apri defero,
The boar's head in hand bring I,
Gentles feasting merrily.
Joyous be all your hearts and free;
But gentle bride most joy to thee,
And ne'er approach thee cares more grave,
Than those proved in the forest cave;
When doubts, thrown on thy noble knight,
But made his virtues glow more bright.

So live that though time's hand may shed,
His silvery snows on either head;
Thy love shall flourish green as now,
The leaves upon this holly bough!

"How say you, my good lord mayor!" cried the king rising, and calling for a bumper of Burgundy; "should we not all drain the cup to these right good wishes for our noble bridegroom, and his fair bride?"

"Aye your grace," replied Fitz Alwyn, "and hallow it with a devout 'Amen!' for the Divine bounty that brought Sir Aymer safely through so much peril without lasting scathe!"

"True, my lord!" said the archbishop of Canterbury; "all rightly attuned hearts will indeed leap with a pious thankfulness, at the mercy shown to Sir Aymer, the just man; and in shuddering at the deeds of the unhappy Sir Stephen, say in the words of Scripture, 'Verily he who diggeth a pit for another shall fall into it himself!'"

THE END.

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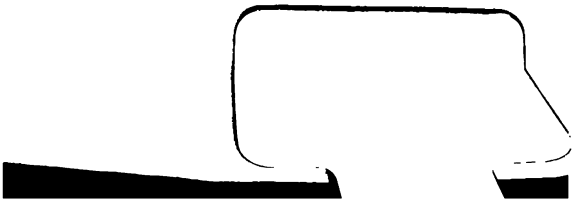
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